

LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

Ol 3sq

v. 2

UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

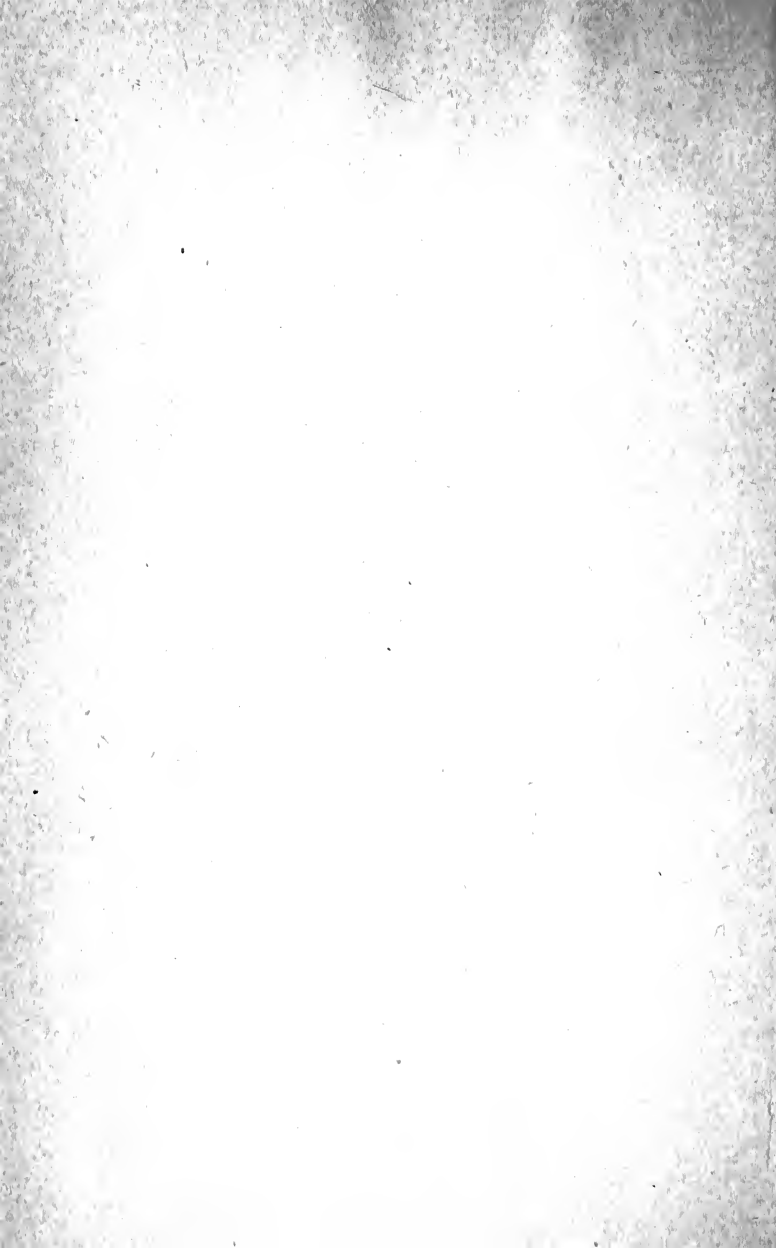
The person charging this material is responsible for its renewal or return to the library on or before the due date. The minimum fee for a lost item is **\$125.00, \$300.00** for bound journals.

Theft, mutilation, and underlining of books are reasons for disciplinary action and may result in dismissal from the University. *Please note: self-stick notes may result in torn pages and lift some inks.*

Renew via the Telephone Center at 217-333-8400, 846-262-1510 (toll-free) or circlib@uiuc.edu.

Renew online by choosing the **My Account** option at: <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/catalog/>

MAY 13 2008



SQUIRE ARDEN.

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF

"CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,"

"SALEM CHAPEL," "THE MINISTER'S WIFE,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

HURST & BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,

13 GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1871.

The Right of Translation is Reserved.

PERTH:
SAMUEL COWAN & Co., PRINTERS.

823

Ol 3sq

v. 2

SQUIRE ARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

UP to this time it had been Clare who had made herself anxious about her brother, worrying herself over his ways and his words, and all the ceaseless turns of thought and expression and perplexing spontaneousness which made him so unlike the Ardens; and Edgar had been conscious of her anxiety with a sense of amusement rather than of any other feeling. But now that their positions were reversed, and that it was he who was anxious about Clare, the matter was a great deal more serious. Edgar Arden felt but lightly the slights or the censures of fortune; he was not specially concerned about himself, nor prone to consider, unless on the strongest provocation, what people thought of him, or if he was taking the best way to obtain their suffrage. But this easy mind, which Clare sometimes took as a sign of levity of disposition, forsook him completely when his own duties were in question. He took them not lightly, but seri-

ously, as Mr. Fazakerly, and Perfitt the steward, and everybody connected with the estate already knew. And not even the estate was so important as Clare. He asked himself, with a puzzled sense of ignorance and incapacity, what in such circumstances a brother ought to do. He had all the theories of a young man against any restraint or contradiction of the affections; but held them much more strongly than most young men, who it must be admitted are apt to see very clearly the necessity of interference in the love affairs of their sisters, however much they may dislike it in their own. Edgar had no family training to help him, and he was aware that English habits in such matters were different from those foreign habits which were the only ones with which he had any acquaintance, and which transferred all power in the matter into the hands of parents. Poor Clare! who had no mother to sympathise with her, no father to guide her—was it not his business to be doubly careful of all her wishes, to watch over her with double anxiety, and anticipate everything she would have him to do? But then, supposing she should wish to marry this landless and not very virtuous cousin, this man whose prospects were naught, whose character was so unsatisfactory, and with whom he himself had so little sympathy—would it be right to let her do it?

Should he acquiesce simply without a word? Should he remonstrate? Should he speak of it to her? Or should he wait until she had first consulted him? Edgar found it very hard to answer these questions. He took to watching his sister, and her manner to Arthur Arden, her ways and her looks, and every passing indication; and got hopelessly bewildered, as was natural, in that maze of fluctuating evidence, which sometimes seemed to him to go dead against, and sometimes to be entirely in favour of his cousin.

For Clare did not let herself go easily down that dangerous slope. She stopped herself now and then, and became utterly repellant to Arthur; now and then she relapsed into softness. Sometimes she would ask, wonderingly, when he meant to go? "Is he to stay on at Arden for ever? Did you ask him to stay as long as he liked?" she would say with a frown on her brow, expending upon her innocent brother the excitement and restless agitation of her own mind. "Should you like him to stay as long as he wished?" Edgar asked on one of these occasions, with a look which he tried hard not to make too anxious. "I think we were far happier before anybody came," Clare answered, with curious heat, and a tone almost of resentment. What did it mean? Did she want really to get rid of the visitor? Did

she really hate him, as she had once said she did ? When Edgar recollected that his sister had said so, and that Arthur Arden had confirmed it, he was quite staggered. And thus June ran on amid difficulties, which much confused the relations between the brother and sister. Lord Newmarch too left traces of himself in the field. He had started a correspondence with both, according to his opportunities—that is, he wrote long letters to Edgar upon the state of the political world, and sent messages and *brochures* to Miss Arden, who sent him messages in return. If she was to marry either of them, surely Lord Newmarch was the more appropriate of the two. He was younger as well as richer, and, though he was a prig, had the reputation of being a good man. He was *galantuomo*, as well as my lord ; and, alas ! it was quite uncertain whether Arthur Arden was *galantuomo*. Poor Edgar felt like an anxious mother, and laughed at himself, but could not mend it, until at last it occurred to him that the best way was to ask advice. Accordingly, he set out very solemnly one day about the end of June to consult his chief authorities. He meant to conceal his personal trouble under the guise of a fable. He would ask Mr. Fielding what a brother (in the abstract) ought to do in such a position, and he would ask Miss

Somers. Miss Somers was not a very wise counsellor; but no doubt her brother must have interfered in her affairs one time at least, and she would have some practical knowledge. He went to lay his case before them with a little trepidation, wondering whether they would find him out at all, and what they would say. Dr. Somers probably would have been the best counsellor of all, but Edgar had no confidence nor pleasure in the Doctor since their last interview. So he chose Mr. Fielding in his study, and Miss Somers on her sofa, two people whose lives had not come to much; but surely they were old enough to know.

Mr. Fielding was in his study writing his sermon. It was the day after one of his grand discussions with the Doctor, and the good man was excited. He was engaged in the manufacture of a polemical sermon, culling little bits out of the polemical sermons which had gone before, but combining them so with links of the new that his adversary might not perceive the antiquity of some of his arguments. It was a relief to him to lay down his pen and clear his mind from the fumes of controversy. "I am very glad to see you, Edgar," he said. "You find me in the midst of my troubles. Young Denbigh, you know, ought to take the preaching more than he does, but I have no confidence in him in a

doctrinal point of view. He would be bringing up some of the new notions, and setting our good folks by the ears—though it is rather hard upon me to preach so often myself.”

“But you are the best able to instruct us, Sir,” said Edgar, who to tell the truth did not often derive a great deal of instruction from Mr. Fielding’s good little sermons. And then the excellent Rector coughed modestly, and blushed a little, and put his paper away from him with a gently deprecating air.

“I suppose, when one lives to be seventy, one must have learned a little—if one has made a right start,” he said, “at least I hope so, Edgar, I hope so; though some of us unfortunately—— The thing that startles me is that Somers should take the Calvinist view. I would not judge him—I would be, indeed, the very last to judge any one; but how a man who has lived, on the whole, rather a careless sort of life—not culpable, I don’t say that—but careless, as, indeed, the best of us are—should stand up for hell and torture, and all that, is more than I can guess. If he had taken another view—more lax instead of more strict——”

“Do you think he cares at all?” said Edgar, still under the prejudice of his last interview.

“God bless us, yes; surely he must care; don’t you think he cares, Edgar? Why, then, he must

be sniggering in his sleeve at me. No, no, my dear boy, of course he must be in earnest; no man could be such a humbug as that. But if it was Mrs. Murray, who is Scotch, it would seem more natural. I here she was in Church on Sunday, looking very serious. But, bless me, Edgar, you are very serious too. Is there anything wrong—with Clare?"

"There is nothing wrong—with anybody," said Edgar. "The fact is, I want your advice. At least, it is not I that want it, but—a very intimate friend of mine. He has got a sister, just like me, very pretty, and all that; but he does not know what to do——"

"About his sister?" asked Mr. Fielding, with a smile. "What does he want to do?"

"Did I tell you there was some one who—wanted to marry her?" said Edgar. "Yes, to be sure, that was it; somebody I—he don't approve of—not a proper match. And he doesn't know what to do, whether to speak to her, or to wait till she speaks, or whether he has any right to interfere. He is not her father, of course, only her brother, and he is in an utter muddle what to do. And of all the people in the world," said Edgar, with a little hysterical laugh which sounded like a giggle, "he has asked me."

"Well, that was a very curious choice, though

the circumstances so much resemble your own," said the Rector, with a smile; "what do you think you would do if it were Clare?"

"That is just the question I have been asking myself," said Edgar, embarrassed. "Supposing, for the mere sake of argument, that it was Clare—I have not the remotest conception what I should do."

"With such a suitor as Arthur Arden, for instance? Edgar, never try to take in anybody, for you cannot do it. I feel for you sincerely——"

"But stop," said Edgar; "I never said Arthur Arden had anything to do with it. I never implied——"

"You have been perfectly wary and prudent," said Mr. Fielding; "but I knew Arthur Arden long before you did, and I am quite sure he means to mend his fortune, if he can, by means of Clare. I knew it before you did, Edgar, and that was why I was so grieved to see him here. Now you know it, my dear boy, send him away."

"Why did not you warn me, if you knew?" asked Edgar, surprised.

"What was the good? He might have changed his mind, or you might have thought me mistaken, and I did not know Clare's feelings, or even yours, Edgar; if you had liked him, for instance——"

But, my dear fellow, now you have found it out, send him away."

"I know as little about Clare's feelings as you do," said Edgar, almost sullenly, feeling that this was really no solution of his difficulties. "Clare, I suppose, is the chief person to be consulted. Should I speak to her? Should I bring matters to a conclusion? Perhaps it might come to nothing if they were let alone."

"Edgar, my advice to you is to make short work," said the Rector, solemnly, "and send him away."

"That is very easy to say," said Edgar, "but it takes more trouble in the doing. What, my nearest relative, my heir if I die! How can I turn him out of the house which is almost as much his as mine? So long as I am unmarried, which I am likely to be for some time, he is my heir."

"Then you like him?" said the Rector; "that was what I feared. Of course, if you like him, and Clare likes him, nobody has any right to say a word."

"But I never said I liked him," said Edgar, pettishly. "Neither love nor hatred seems necessary so far as I am concerned; but could not something be done that would be just without being disagreeable? I don't like to treat him badly, and yet——"

The Rector shook his head. "I think I would have courage of mind to do what I advise," he said; "he is too old for Clare, and he has not a good character, which is a great deal worse. He will make love to her one day, and then the next he will come down to the village—— Faugh! I don't like to soil my lips with talking of such things. He is not a good man. I love Clare like my own child, and I would fight to the last before I would give her to that man. He ought never to have come here, Edgar, never again."

"Did anything happen when he was here before; do you know anything?" said Edgar, eagerly.

"He is your enemy, my dear boy, he is your enemy," said Mr. Fielding; and that was all that could be elicited from him. Edgar remembered that Clare had used the very same words, and it did not make him more comfortable. But yet, an enemy to himself was of so very much less importance; in short, it mattered next to nothing. He smiled, and tried to persuade Mr. Fielding that it was so, but produced no result. "Send him away" was all the Rector would say: and it was so easy for one who had not got it to do to give such advice to Edgar, who was a man incapable of sending any stranger away who claimed his hospitality, and whose sense of that virtue was as keen as an

Arab's. He would have taken in the worst of enemies had he wanted shelter, with a foolish, young, highminded scorn of any danger. Danger! Let the fellow do his worst; let him put forth all the powers he had at his command, Edgar was not afraid. But then! when Clare was in question, the importance of the matter increased in a moment tenfold, and he could not make up his mind what to do.

CHAPTER II.

FROM Mr. Fielding Edgar went to Miss Somers, to whom he told his story under the same disguise, but who unlike the Rector believed him undoubtingly, and gave him her best sympathy, but not much enlightenment, as may be supposed. And he returned to Arden very little the wiser, asking himself still the same question, What should he do? Must he go home and be patient and look on while Arthur Arden, quite unmolested and at his ease, laid snares and toils for Clare? Clare had no warning, no preparation, no defence against these skilful and elaborate plots. She might fall into the net at any moment. And was it possible that her brother's duty in the matter was to sit still and look on? Would not his very silence and passive attitude embolden and encourage the suitor? Would it not appear like a tacit consent to his plans and hopes? He was walking up the avenue while these thoughts were passing through his mind, when all at once there came to Edgar a suggestion which

cleared his whole firmament. I call it a suggestion, because I do not understand any more than he himself did how it happened that all at once, being in utter darkness, he should see light, and perceive in a moment what was the best thing to do. If some unseen spirit had whispered it all at once in his ear it could not have been more vivid or more sudden. "I must go to town," Edgar said to himself. He did not want to go to town, nor had the idea occurred to him before; but the moment it came to him he perceived that this was the thing to do. Arthur could not stay when he was gone; indeed, to take him away from Clare he did not object to his cousin's company in London. "Poor fellow! after all I have the sweet and he has the bitter," Edgar thought; and to share his purse with his kinsman was the easiest matter, so long as the kinsman did not object. After he had made this sudden decision his heart sat lightly in his breast, and everything brightened up. He even grew conceited, the simple fellow, thinking on the whole it was so very clever of him to have thought of so beautiful and simple a solution to all his troubles, though, as I have said, he did not think of it at all, but had it simply thrown into his mind without any exertion of his.

"I have taken a great resolution," he said that evening after dinner before Clare left the table. "I

have made up my mind to take the advice of all my good friends, and to betake myself to town."

"To town!" said Clare and Arthur, in a breath—she with simple astonishment, he with dismay. "To town, Edgar? but I thought you hated town," added Clare.

"I don't know anything about it—I don't love it," he said; but one must not always mind that. There is Newmarch, who writes me—and—why, there are the Thornleighs. With such inducements don't you think it is worth a man's while to go?"

"The Thornleighs; oh, they are cheap enough. You will meet them everywhere," said Arthur, with a sneer. "If that is all you go to town for——"

"The Thornleighs!" said Clare; and she made a rapid feminine calculation, and decided that though it was very sudden it must be Gussy, and that a new mistress to Arden was inevitable. It did not strike her so painfully as it might have done, in the tumult of her personal thoughts. "Everything will be strange to you," she said. "And then you are so fond of the country, and have to make acquaintance with everything. Don't you think, Edgar—that might wait?"

"What might wait?" said Edgar, laughing; but he kept firm to his proposal. "Yes, I must go as soon as it is practicable," he said to Arthur when

they were alone. "I have got to make acquaintance with my own country. I don't know London any more than I know Constantinople; I have been in it, and gazed at it, but that is all. And Newmarch is a very sensible fellow," he added, abruptly. "By the way, Arden, what do you say to coming with me? You might share my rooms. If you have not any pressing engagements——"

"I have nothing at all to do," said Arthur. "Of course, I should rather have stayed here. I need not tell you that, after all I have told you. Arden is to me the most captivating place in England. But if you are going, of course I must go too." And he sighed a profound sigh.

"Of course," said Edgar, with quiet calmness; and then there was an uncomfortable pause.

"That is what I object to," said Arthur Arden; "You give me to understand you won't interfere, and then you as good as turn me out of the house by going away yourself. By Jove! I believe that is the reason why——"

"If you think I am to give up all control over my movements because you happen to be in the house——" said Edgar, with a laugh. "No, Arden, that will never do. And I never said I would not interfere. It might be my duty. I am Clare's brother, and the head of the house."

"Clare can take care of herself, and so can the house. Fancy *you*——"

"I am all it has for a head," said Edgar, keeping his temper with an effort. "But this is very unprofitable sort of talk."

And then there was a gloomy pause, all conversation being arrested. Arthur Arden had been making, he thought, considerable progress with Clare, which was a thing that made Clare's brother much less important. She and Old Arden seemed almost within reach of his hand, and what should he care for the Hall and the Squire if he were Mr. Arden of Old Arden, with a beautiful wife? But to be thus sent away at the most critical moment! Arthur was sullen, and did not think it worth his while to conceal it. He asked himself, Should he risk the final effort—should he put it to the test, and know at once what his fortune was to be? in which case he might scorn the spurious Arden and all his efforts; or should he be wary, and flatter him, and wait?

He had not yet resolved the question when they joined Clare on the terrace, which was her summer drawing-room. But Arthur's mind was not relieved by seeing the lady of his hopes take her brother's arm, and lead him away along the front of the house, talking to him. "Has anything happened

that makes you want to go?" Clare asked. "Have you heard anything—have you had any letter—is it about—Gussy? I am the only one that has a right to know, Edgar; you might tell *me*."

"Tell you what?"

"Why you are going to town: there must be some reason. I am sure it is not caprice. Edgar, don't you know, I care for everything that concerns you; but you speak as if your affairs were of no consequence, as if they were nothing to me."

"I am not so ungrateful nor so silly," said Edgar: "but look here. I can't tell you why I'm going, Clare; and yet I am going for a good reason, which is quite satisfactory to myself. Can you allow me as much private judgment as that?"

"Of course, your private judgment is all in all," said Clare, affronted. "How could any one attempt to dictate to you? But one might wish to know without thrusting in one's opinion—— Tell me only this one thing, Edgar. Is it about Gussy Thornleigh?"

Edgar laughed in the fulness of his innocence. "No more about Gussy Thornleigh than about——"

"Me?" said Clare. "You are quite sure? If it is business, that is quite a different thing. I hope I am not so foolish as to think of interfering with

business. But I do feel so concerned—so anxious, Edgar dear, about——”

“About what?” said Edgar, meeting her troubled look with his habitual smile.

“About your wife,” said Clare, solemnly. She only shook her head when he laughed, disturbing all the quiet echoes. “Ah, yes, you may laugh,” she said, “but it is of the greatest importance. I assure you our—cousin thinks so too.”

Edgar made a profane exclamation. “I am infinitely obliged to him, I am sure,” he said, after the objectionable words had escaped his lips. “Our cousin thinks so too!” What was “our cousin” between these two, who ought to be everything to each other? And then it occurred to him, with a softening sense of that comic element which runs through human nature, that while Arthur Arden so kindly interested himself in his (Edgar’s) hypothetical interests, he, on his side, was taking a good deal of trouble wholly and solely on Arthur’s account. His kinsman was not aware how much he was influenced by this consideration; and the thought of this mutual regard amused Edgar, even in the midst of his displeasure. “We all take an interest in each other,” he said, laughing, half jestingly, yet with a sense of fun which was very odd to Clare.

And then she went, all unconscious, to her little table, and sat down, and took her work. She did not work very much, her hands being full of things more important—the affairs of the parish and estate ; but to her, as to most other women, it was a welcome occasional refuge. It was true, quite true, that she was anxious about Edgar's wife, and ready to believe in the attractions of Gussy Thornleigh, or any one else who came in his way ; but other feelings confused her mind at the same time. When Edgar went away of course Arthur must go also ; and Arthur had managed to twine himself up with her life in the strangest subtle way. How should she bear the blank when they were gone ? It would be like the time before Edgar's return—the silent days when she was alone in Arden. But these days had not been quickened by any new touch of life as the present time had been ; and it made her shudder to think how such grey days would look when they came back.

"This is fatal news to me," said Arthur, softly sitting down opposite to her. "I thought I might have stayed here at Arden, and for once kept out of the racket of town."

"I thought you liked town," said Clare, "and I thought my brother hated it. I must have been mistaken in both."

“Do not be so hard upon me. I have liked town more than I ought. When there are a good many things in a man’s life that he is very glad to forget, and not many that are much pleasure to think of, town is a resource to him; but when there comes a balmy time like this, when it almost looks as if the gates of heaven might open once in a way——”

“You are very poetical,” said Clare, forcing herself to smile, though her heart began to flutter and beat with the sense of something more to come.

“Am I?” he said, and then began to mutter between his teeth, the first line faintly, the second more audible—

“If Maud were all that she seemed,
And her smile were all that I deemed,
Then this world were not so bitter
But a smile might make it sweet.”

Clare heard, but she did not smile. She kept her eyes on her work, and her lips shut close. And after he had discharged this little arrow, he sat and looked at her and wondered. She gave him no encouragement—not the least. She would not even let it be apparent that she understood, or that there was any meaning whatever perceptible to her in what he said. The only thing that could give him any hope was a subdued consciousness about her, a thrill of suppressed excitement—something which

made her fix her eyes upon her work and restrain her breath. Arthur saw this, and it made his heart beat. She was expectant—waiting for other words which she foresaw were coming—words which he would have given a great deal to be allowed to speak. For one moment he hesitated, and had almost gone on. But again a cold dread came over him. Was it according to nature that a proud girl like Clare should thus wait for her lover's declaration if she meant to answer it favourably? Was it not a stately, reluctant kindness on her part, to get over a crisis which she felt to be coming, and spare him as much pain as possible? He shrank back into himself with a sense of suffering greater than he could have considered possible when this idea took possession of him. Would she have given him this gracious opportunity, waited for him in such stillness and consciousness, had any word but "No" been on her lips? He did not think that Clare felt herself like a sovereign princess, one whom men dare not woo unless when signs and tokens to justify the daring are supplied. She sat motionless, expecting, meaning to give him courage. And he took from this indication of royal readiness to listen only an intimation of despair.

"Yes, it is fatal news to me," he said, with a deep sigh; and he got up, and stood over her,

reluctant to go, too unhappy to stay. "When shall I see Arden again, I wonder, and what will have become of us all by that time?" he added, taking momentary courage; but just then Edgar came up to them, and it was too late.

CHAPTER III.

CLARE'S thoughts had travelled very far during Arthur Arden's visit at the Hall. When he arrived she had made up her mind to endure him, to have as little to say to him as possible, to watch anxiously all his relations with her brother, and keep all her wits about her to counteract his schemes against Edgar, if he had any. But all these original intentions had floated away from her, she could not tell how. The whole condition of affairs was changed. He had no schemes against Edgar: on the contrary, he heartily liked and thought well of the strange, generous, open-hearted soul, who was so very unlike all the Ardens had ever been, and yet was the head of the Ardens, and master of the family destiny. Arthur did not understand him any more than Clare did, but had given in his declaration of loyalty and support. So that the great obstacle—was it the only obstacle between them?—was swept away at once. And then there had been the doubt of her cousin's motives, the uncertainty

as to his meaning, whether he loved her for herself, or whether—but this Clare had been very reluctant to think of—he had contemplated enriching himself by her means. It would have been quite natural that he should have done so by means of any other lady. It was not the mere mercenary pretence at love which revolted his young kinswoman, but simply a personal aversion to be herself the subject of such a commercial transaction. This dread had also floated away. How could it withstand the influence of his presence—of his looks and words, and the absolute devotion he threw into his manner towards her? They had been together for long days, spending, with little meetings and partings, hours in each other's society—not alone, indeed, but almost better than alone; for a skilful and experienced hunter like Arthur Arden has it in his power to isolate his victim, and to make her feel herself the one object of interest—the one being in the room and in the world, with almost a more subtle certainty than could be given by downright words. All this Clare had come through, and it had wrought a great change upon her. She had been penetrated with Arthur Arden's influence through and through. She had grown to feel that everything she had, or anybody else had, would be better spent in his service than in any other—that it was natural to

devote her possessions to him—that he had a right to appropriate what he would. This was never breathed into words, even in her own mind, but it had come to be her fixed, half-conscious principle. Mercenary!—how could it be mercenary? The world had done him the huge injustice of leaving him, a born prince, without any due provision, and was it not some one's duty—every one's duty—to neutralise that horrible injustice? Clare no longer thought of it as a desire on his part, but as a necessity on her own. And now he must go away, as poor, as unfriended, as lonely as ever, without either money in his purse, or companion to make his life go easier! She too grew furious with Edgar as she thought it all over. For a caprice! It must be a caprice. He said it was not for Gussy Thornleigh, which would have been a feasible reason, though frivolous. And what then was it for? A foolish boyish fancy, an inclination towards pleasure-seeking and the follies of London society. Nothing more! And to risk two lives for that! To break up all the combinations that were daily growing into shape and becoming practicable—all for a vulgar fancy to go to town! Clare was very angry with her brother. She thought more meanly of him than she had ever done before. “It is his education,” she said to herself. “He must have been used to

all kinds of junketing, as people are abroad, and he has tried to get into our quiet English ways without effect. And he feels he must get back to his natural element. Oh, heavens, *my* brother!" This was how poor Edgar was judged in the midst of his self-denial—the usual fate of those who think more of others than of themselves.

It was not till the very day before her brother's departure that Clare acquired a clearer light upon the subject. She had gone to visit Miss Somers, which was a duty she had much neglected of late. The village too had been neglected; she could scarcely tell why. "I have been so busy," she said, "with visitors in the house. Visitors are so rare in Arden, one gets out of the way of them; but now Edgar is going away, of course I shall be quiet enough."

This she said with a sigh; but Miss Somers was not quick enough at the first moment to understand that Clare had sighed. She was full of other subjects, and anxious for information on her own account.

"Dear Edgar, he is so nice," she said. "A young man, you know, who must have so many things—but just as pleased—— Do you know, I think he is—a little—fond of me, Clare! Of course I don't mean anything but what is right. I am old enough to be—— And then to think he should ask in that

nice way—— Fancy, Clare, my advice! If it had been my brother, you know—or anybody—but my advice!”

“Did Edgar ask your advice?” said Clare, with a smile; and she said to herself what a deceiver he is—he will do anything to please people. As if anybody could be the better of Miss Somers’s advice!

“It was not for himself, my dear. Of course it can’t be very—— I may tell *you*. That friend of his, Clare, and the sister, you know—— And then somebody that was fond of her—and what was he to do? It was as good as a novel—indeed, I think it was rather better. Don’t you remember that story where there was— Oh, my dear child, I am sure you remember! There was such a sweet girl—Helena was her name—or no—I think it was Adela, or something—and she had a lover. Just the same—— And then the good brother in such distress. Clare, why do you turn so red? I am sure you know——”

“About a brother and a sister and a gentleman who loved her,” said Clare, colouring high. “Oh, no—I mean yes—I think I do recollect. And did you say the brother wanted your advice?”

This was said in a tone which chilled poor Miss Somers through and through to her very heart.

“I told him so,” she said, faltering. “Of course I never pretended to set up to be very—— And how

could I give advice? But then the poor dear brother was so—— And I suppose he thought a lady, you know—and old enough to be—or perhaps it was only to please me. I told him oh, no! never, never! And I told him some things that were *too*—— Dear Edgar was quite affected, Clare.”

“Did you advise him to go away?” asked Clare, with a smouldering fire in her eyes.

“Oh, my dear, could I take upon me to—— And then he never said anything about—— It was the poor girl I was thinking of. I said oh, no! never, never!—rather anything than that. You know what I have said to you so often, Clare? When a girl has a disappointment, you never can tell. It may be consumption, or it may be—oh, my dear, the unlikeliest things!—bilious fever I have known, or even rheumatism. I told dear Edgar, and he was so nice; he was sure his friend would never think—— And fancy, dear, of its being *my* advice!”

“It must be very flattering to you,” said Clare; but she rose instantly, and took a very summary leave, avoiding Miss Somers’s kiss. She went home, glowing with anger and mortified pride. It was but too easy to see through so simple a veil. Edgar, who met her on the way home, could not understand her glowing cheek and angry eye. He turned and

walked with her, feeling quite concerned about his sister. "What has happened?" he said. "Something disagreeable at the village? Can I set it right for you, Clare?"

"No," she said; "it is nothing disagreeable in the village. It is much nearer than the village. Edgar, I have found out why you are going away. You are going for my sake; you think I am not able to manage my own affairs—to take care of myself. You think so poorly of your sister as that!"

"What do you mean?" he said. "*I* think anything that is disagreeable or distasteful to you? You cannot believe it for a moment——"

"It is that Arthur Arden may go," she said firmly, but with flaming cheeks. And Edgar looked at her confused, not knowing what to say. But after the first moment he recovered himself.

"I think he has paid us a sufficiently long visit, I confess," he said. "I think, as it cannot be his while I live, that perhaps he had better not remain longer at Arden. But why should this be a matter of offence to you?"

Clare was silent; her blush grew hotter, her eyes were glowing still, but she faltered, and drooped her head as she went on.

"If that was all! if you had no other meaning!

Edgar, do you think I am so frivolous, so lightly moved, so——”

“Clare,” he said seriously, “do not let us discuss a subject which has not yet been put in our way. I think of you as the creature I love best in the world. I prize your happiness, and comfort, and welfare more than anything in the world. What would you have me say? I do not think I am wronging any one by going for a few weeks to London. I neither reproach nor restrain by so simple a step. Don’t let us talk of it any more.”

“You do both,” said Clare, under her breath; but Edgar was kind, and would not hear. He was sorry for her, seeing her emotion, and he was half-ashamed besides that his immaculate sister—the Princess whom everybody served and honoured—should suffer herself to be thus moved. It gave him a little pang to think that anything connected with Arthur Arden, or, indeed, with any man, could thus disturb her stately maidenly serenity. A man may be very respectful of love in the abstract, but the sight of his sister in love is a sight which is not pleasant to him. He tried to shut it out from himself by rushing hurriedly into other matters of conversation, and did a great deal of talking by way of covering her silence. Clare recovered her composure by degrees, and then had to recover from the

shame which followed, and the feeling of having betrayed herself, so that Edgar's monologue was of infinite value to her, though, perhaps, she was scarcely grateful enough to him for keeping it up ; and it was then that she fully found out that her brother, who was so weakly considerate of everybody's feelings, and anxious to save everybody pain, was nevertheless very firm when he thought it necessary, and did not give in, as many people supposed he would be sure to do. This discovery had a great effect upon his sister. It bewildered her, as going entirely against her preconceived notions, and it also moved her to a little alarm. For she, too, had supposed he would yield, being so tender of giving pain, and he had not yielded nor budged a step. And Clare, high-minded and high-spirited and proud as she was, grew frightened, as she glanced with furtive eyes at her gentle brother, who, she knew well, would not hurt a fly.

But if Clare was frightened, the effect upon Edgar was still more serious. He felt that his flight was too late to do any good. She loved this man whom he thought so unworthy of her. So much older, poorer, less true and good than herself ; a man, with so many soils of the world upon him, whom even Edgar felt to possess experiences of which he would rather know nothing ; but Clare loved him !

Nothing else could account for her agitation. It was too late to banish him from the house, too late to build up defences round her—the stronghold was gone. Edgar's quick mind jumped from that conclusion to an instant and final summary of Arthur Arden's character. He was a man who might mend, as so many men might mend, if prosperity smiled upon him. If he had love, and money, and an established position, he might settle down, as so many have settled down, all his wild oats sown, and himself a most virtuous member of society—"a sober man among his boys," giving them the best advice and example. Had he been the Squire, he would have fitted the place beautifully. This idea came to Edgar in spite of himself. He would have made an admirable Squire, and the little process of wild oats-sowing would have been no social disadvantage to him. Even now, if he became Mr. Arden, of Old Arden, in right of his wife—this was one of the things that annoyed Edgar, but he tried to look it in the face. His sister had said no more about giving that possession up, and Edgar did not find it within the limits of his powers to make a proposal to her on the subject—and accordingly the chances were that Arthur would be Arden, of Old Arden, while Edgar was only the young Squire. It galled even his sweet temper to think of this transference. But,

putting feeling aside, and thinking only of justice, he did not doubt that his cousin would mend. He had reached the age when men often mend, when dissipation becomes less sweet, and reputation more dear, and when comfort comes in as a powerful auxiliary to virtue. To have only such satisfaction as could be given by these thoughts when he was considering Clare's future husband, and her hopes of happiness, was poor enough; but still it was better than the thought that he was giving her over to the charge of a man who would ruin her and break her heart.

The household at Arden was an uneasy one that night; the three kept together, making each other uncomfortable, but with a vague sense of safety in company. Edgar was anxious to prevent any definite explanation; Arthur was afraid to risk the words he would be sure to say if Clare and he were alone; and she, not knowing what she feared, not knowing what she wished, afraid of her brother, afraid of her cousin, uncertain of herself, kept between them, with such a painful attempt at ordinary talk as was possible. They were to separate to-morrow—the two men into the world, the woman into the stillness which had been familiar to her so long. “I am used to it, but it will be different,” she said, almost pathetically, strong in the presence of both, and

feeling that what she said could produce no agitating response. "It will be very different for all of us," said Arthur Arden. "Will there ever come days like these again?"

CHAPTER IV.

It would be difficult to conceive anything more strangely lonely and bleak than Arden seemed to Clare the day after her brother and cousin left it. She wandered about the vacant rooms and out upon the terrace, and kept thinking that she heard their voices and steps, and caught glimpses of them turning the corners. But they were gone—Edgar to come back again shortly, so that could scarcely be counted a calamity. But Arthur—would he come at all? Would he be years of coming, as he had been before? It seemed to Clare that it was years instead of weeks since she had dwelt thus alone and tranquil, waiting for Edgar's return. She had been alone, but then her loneliness had seemed natural. She took it as a matter of course, scarcely pausing to think that she was different from others, or, if she ever did so, feeling her isolation almost as much a sign of superiority as of anything less pleasant. She was the Chatelaine—the one sole lady of the land, in her soft maidenly state; and the visits of the

kind friends who offered themselves on all sides to come and stay with her, out of pity for her solitude, had been more a trouble than a pleasure to her. But now it seemed to Clare that she would be thankful for any companionship—anything that would free her from her own thoughts. She felt like a boat which had drifted ashore, like something which had been thrown out of the ordinary course of existence. Life had gone away and left her; and yet she was more full of life than she had ever been before, tingling to the very finger points, expecting, hoping, looking for a thousand new things to come. Once it had not occurred to her to look for anything new; but now every hour as it came thrilled her with consciousness that her life might be changed in it, that it might prove the supreme moment which should decide the character and colour of all the rest.

And yet what hope, what chance, what possibility was there that this auspicious moment should come now? Had not “everybody” been driven away? This was how she phrased it to herself—not one person, but every one. Who could approach her now in the solitude which was a more effectual guard than twenty brothers? If “any one” wished to come, if any one had anything to say, why, the visit must be postponed, and the words left unsaid, until—how could she tell how long? Three years

had passed between Arthur Arden's two last visits. What if three years should come and go again before Chance or Fate brought him back? It could only be Chance that had done it this time, not Providence; for if Providence had been the agent, then the visit must have come to something, and not ended without result. Thus Clare mused, as it were, in the depths of her being, concealing even from herself what she was thinking. When Arthur Arden's name flitted across that part of her mind which lay, so to speak, in the light, she blushed, and started with a sense of guilt; but in the shadowy corners, where thought has no need of words, and where a hundred aimless cogitations pass like breath, and no sense of responsibility comes in, she put no bridle upon her dreaming fancy. And it was all new to her; for dreams had never been much in Clare's way. Hers had been a practical intelligence, busied with many things to do and think of—the village and her subjects in it; the legislation necessary for them; the wants of the old women and the children—a hundred matters of detail which deserved the consideration of a wise ruler, and yet must be kept subordinate to greater principles. Even the larger questions affecting the estate had come more or less into Clare's hands. She had been allowed no time to dream, and she had not dreamt; but now idleness

and loneliness fell upon her both together. She was weary of the village and its concerns. She had nothing else to occupy her. And, indeed, she had no desire for other occupations, but preferred this new musing—this maze of fancies—to anything else in earth and heaven.

But the evenings were dreary, dreary, when darkness fell, and the wistful shadows of the summer night gathered about her, and no one came to break the silence. She tried to follow her brother in imagination, and to picture to herself what he might be doing—hanging about Gussy Thornleigh, perhaps—letting himself drift into the channel indicated by Lady Augusta. Ah!—and then, while she thought she was still thinking of Edgar and Gussy, Clare's fancies would take their flight in another direction to another hero. When this, however, had gone on for a few days and nights, she was seized with a sense that it must not continue—that such a way of passing her time was fatal. It was much too like the girls whom Clare had read of in novels, whom she had indignantly denied to be true representatives of womankind, and whom she had scorned and blushed for in her heart. Was she to become one of that maudlin, sentimental band, to whom love, as novel-writers and essayists said, was everything, and to whom the inclinations of one man in this

world conveyed life or death? Clare's modesty, and her pride, and her good sense, all rose in arms. She had given up all her former pursuits for these first dreamy days; but now she woke up, and tied on her hat, and forced herself down the avenue to the village. There something was sure to be found to do—whatever might be the state of her own mind or its fancies. She walked straight to Sarah's cottage, where Mary Smith and Ellen Jones were still busy with their needlework and their clear-starching. Sarah was sitting out in her cottage doorway, enjoying the evening calm. The sun had not yet set, but it had fallen below the line of the trees; and Sarah's doorway was shadowy and cool. The old woman had many grumbles bottled up for Clare's private enjoyment, which had been aggravated by keeping. Mary was "the thoughtlessest lass." She had burned a big hole in Miss Somers' muslin dressing-gown with an iron that was too hot. She had torn Mrs Pimpernel's lace; and then, instead of trying to do her best for the future, she had cried her eyes out, and become hysterical, and could do nothing at all. Nor was Ellen a great deal better. Sally, next door, had got a piece of work clean spoiled in her hands; and some things as she was making for Mrs Solms, the Rector's housekeeper, had just got to be unpicked on the spot. "The back was put to the front, and

the wrong side to the right side—as if she had tried !” said old Sarah. “ It couldn’t be accident, Miss Clare ; and the sleeves put in bottom up. It’s enough to break a body’s heart, after all the trouble I’ve took.” The two culprits stood curtsying with their aprons to their eyes while this dreadful picture was being drawn ; and Clare put on her most solemn face, and told them she was very sorry. “ I hope I shall never hear anything of the kind again,” she said, in her most serious tones ; and then stopped, and sighed with a weariness which had never before moved her. “ Am I to go on all my life,” she said to herself, “ looking after Mary’s clear-starching and Ellen’s sewing ? Is this all I am to have out of the existence which is so rich and full to some people ?” And for the moment Clare thought she understood Helena Thornleigh and the rest of the young women who wanted something to do. But this, the reader will perceive, was not really because she wanted anything to do, or was dissatisfied with the conditions of her own life, but only because she was in that state of suspense which turns existence all awry, and demands excitement of some kind outside to neutralise the excitement within.

Clare’s mind, however, was suddenly diverted from herself when she looked into old Sarah’s living-room, and saw another figure, which she had

not before remarked, seated in the background. When Sarah perceived her keen look inside, she approached Clare with nods and significant glances. "Yes, Miss," she said in a whisper, "she's there, and as sensible as you or me, and the sweetest little thing that ever was, though she's Scotch, and I don't hold with Scotch, not in general. Just you go in and say a word to her, Miss Clare."

"I don't think she ought to be left by herself," said Clare, drawing back with a certain repugnance. Jeanie was seated in a low chair, and looked like a child—her pretty head, with its golden hair closely braided about it, bent over her work. She looked so serious, so absorbed in her occupation, so far removed from the feverish regions in which Clare felt herself to be wandering, that the dislike she had felt for this mysterious child suddenly warmed into a certain curiosity and interest. She paused on the threshold, looking in, feeling as if the step she was about to take was much more important than an innocent every-day entrance into Sarah's cottage; but after that momentary hesitation she went in, causing the little recluse to raise her head. When she saw who it was Jeanie rose, and gave Miss Arden a chair—not as Mary or Ellen would have done, but with simple courtesy. She stood until her visitor was seated, and then sat down

again. But still she did not give to Clare that curtsey which she felt to be her due.

"I am glad to see you are better," Clare said, with a little stiffness; and then she was melted in spite of herself by the soft wistful look in little Jeanie's eyes. "Has your mother left you alone?" she said. "It must be strange to you to be left alone in such a place as this."

"They are all kind, kind," said Jeanie. "I'm no lonely, as if it was new to me; and then I have something to do. My head has been so strange, I have never had a seam for so long. And now it is as if I was coming back——"

"Poor child!" said Clare, "does it make you suffer much? Do you feel ill when—— I mean when——your head has been strange, as you say——?"

"I canna think about it," said Jeanie, softly; "I mustna think about it; the world begins to swim and swim, and the light to go out of my eyes—— I will sew my seam, if ye please."

And then there was a little pause, and everything was still. Old Sarah and her pupils stayed outside, and the murmur of their voices sounded softly in the summer air; but within the clock ticked, and the white ashes from the half-dead fire fell now and then faintly on the hearth, and Jeanie's "seam" rustled as she worked; that was all.

Though there was that ghost of a fire, the room, with its tiny window and thick walls, was cooler than many a much better ventilated house; and the light was cool and green and shadowy, coming through the tall woody branches of a geranium trained upon a fanshaped framework, which answered instead of a curtain to the little window. Clare sat embarrassed, not knowing how to address this creature, who was so unlike anything she had known or encountered before.

“Do you remember your home? I suppose it is a place very different from Arden?” she said at last.

“Home! oh it’s bonnie, bonnie!—bonnier than Arden,” cried Jeanie, and then she paused with instinctive courtesy. “But Arden is beautiful,” she said. “It’s a’ so beautiful that God has made. I canna’ bide towns and streets and places that are built—but Arden—— and the green grass and the bonnie trees——”

Where had the child learned to think of other people’s sentiments—was it natural to her nation—or only to her individual character? Clare felt that the Marys and Ellens of the village would not have thought of any such refinement. “Do you live among the hills?” she said.

“On Loch Arroch side. The trees are very

bonnie, and so are all the parks and pleasant fields," said Jeanie; "but if you were to see the hills up among the clouds, and the bonnie water at their feet! and then when you live always there, and your heart gets full——"

"Poor child!" said Clare again, growing more and more interested in spite of herself. "You are too young to have felt your heart grow full as you say."

"I am seventeen," said Jeanie. "Plenty folk have learned trouble before that. Granny says she had nobody to take care of her when she was seventeen—neither father nor mother, nor—— And I have always her—— Oh, if you had seen my Willie!" she said suddenly, "he was aye so bright and so kind. Miss Arden, you have a brother too——"

"My poor child!" cried Clare. "Jeanie, Jeanie, if that is your name, don't think of that. For your poor grandmother's sake don't do anything to bring it on."

"I cannot bring it on," said Jeanie; "it comes when I am not thinking of Willie, if there is ever a time I am not thinking of him. It's best to let me cry. Oh my bonnie boy! and in the sea, Miss Arden; think of that! no a grave under the sod, where I could go and greet, but in yon great, great, wild stormy sea—it is that I cannot bear."

"Let us talk of something else," said Clare, trembling. "Do you like old Sarah? I hope she is very attentive to you and does everything you want. You must come to the hall some day and see me; I am all alone in the hall."

"Where has he gone that you are your lane?" said Jeanie; and she raised her head with a look of anxiety which startled Clare.

"He! whom?" cried Miss Arden; she drew herself up and looked at Jeanie from her altitude, feeling all her prejudices reawaken. Jeanie, for her part, put down her work in her lap, and crossed her hands softly with a smile and a sigh.

"I am meaning your bonnie brother, Miss Arden. Oh, I wish he was my brother! We dinna know him, but we're awfu' fond of him, both grannie and me."

"Fond of him!" exclaimed Clare, more and more bewildered. "Do you know what you say?"

"Oh aye, real fond," said innocent Jeanie; "he has such a bonnie light in his eyes."

And while Clare sat in a state of partial stupefaction wondering what this might mean, there was a little stir at the door, and Mrs. Murray came in, as it were to the rescue, before her child could commit herself more.

CHAPTER V.

"I AM speaking of Miss Arden's brother," said Jeanie, introducing her grandmother into the conversation without a moment's pause. "Granny, tell Miss Arden. He's like faces we ken, and his voice is like a kent voice. If I was in trouble I would go and ask him. I would trust him, and I would be safe. Granny!"

"She speaks as others of her age would scarcely speak," said the grandmother, quietly. "She's no like others, Miss Arden. Her trouble is like a shield about her, like an angel o' the Lord. You think she should not name like that a gentleman that's far, far above her, but it's in her innocence she speaks. She has taken a fancy into her head that your brother is like her brother——"

"So he is," said Jeanie, softly. "She would have thought so too, if she had seen my Willie; no like yon grand, dark, hard man that comes and troubles me with his e'en; but oh, so friendly and so kind, and like a real brother. The other gives

me a thrill at my heart. I'm feared still, though it's no *him*."

"What other?" said Clare in some amazement. Except the Rector and the Doctor there was no gentleman in Arden of whom Jeanie could have spoken, and neither of them could be so described—a grand, dark, hard man! Her heart began to flutter painfully, and no one answered her question. Perhaps it was because there was a rustle and movement outside, and Sarah appeared on the threshold. "Mrs. Pimpernel's acoming, Miss Clare, with her daughter and the gentlemen," said Old Sarah. "T'ou'd lady's awful pushing, and you're not one as likes that sort; and Mrs. Murray, it's best for you and for me as Jeanie should go upstairs."

"I will go upstairs too," said Clare, hurriedly; and she rose and went hastily up the narrow staircase, forgetting that any invitation was necessary. But Mrs. Murray did not forget. She made a little ceremonious speech to the unceremonious young lady of the manor. "It's a poor place," she said, "but such as it is Miss Arden is very welcome." Clare, however, was far too deeply convinced of her own importance to see any reproof in these words.

"Come and sit here," said Jeanie, softly, stealing a little hand, which was like a child's, into Clare's. "I see all the folk passing from this window.

Granny says no to do it; but I say what harm? And there he is, that dark man. I saw him with you, and once since then, and he spoke soft and kind; but oh, Miss Arden, I'm feared for that man! You canna see into his heart; whiles I think, has he a heart at all? And what does he want coming here?"

Clare's curiosity, or rather her anxiety, was great. She allowed herself to be drawn to the lattice window, which stood half open, all embowered in honeysuckle. She kept Jeanie's soft hand in hers with a sense of clinging to it, as if there was help in its soft childlike pressure. The new-comers were walking down the village street, filling the breadth of the road—Mrs. Pimpernel full-blown and gorgeous as usual; her pretty daughter half smothered in her finery; at one hand the young curate, Mr. Denbigh, whose head was supposed to be turned by croquet and Alice; and on the other—— Clare said to herself she had known it all along. She had divined it from the first moment when Jeanie spoke. She stood leaning one arm against the half-opened window, and with the other hand holding Jeanie fast. Yes, of course, it was he; she had known it all along. The scene looked so familiar to her that she seemed to have seen it somewhere in a picture ages ago. Pretty Alice Pimpernel, blushing, and,

saying two words by intervals now and then—"Oh, no, Mr. Arden," and "Oh, yes, Mr. Arden" (was not that the sort of conversation Alice Pimpernel kept up? somebody, she could not remember who, had once told Clare)—and stooping over her, doing his best to entertain her, smiling that smile she knew so well—— Clare grasped Jeanie's hand so hard that it hurt the girl, who gave a half-suppressed cry; and then the young Princess of Arden dropped suddenly into the nearest chair. Her heart seemed to sink somewhere into unimaginable depths. It was no surprise to her. She had known it all along. And yet——

Jeanie stood by her, unaware of what was passing through her companion's mind; or was she somehow aware, though Clare said not a word? "He thinks little, little of her he's speaking to," said Jeanie, softly. "He thinks nothing of her. If it was me, I would not let a man speak to me and look at me like that, and scorn me, Miss Arden. They're rich and grand, but he thinks he's better than them——"

"And he *is* better than them," said Clare, under her breath. "He is an Arden. Better than them! They are nobody. You are better. Hush! you don't understand——"

And she held the little hand clasped tight, and

almost leaned upon Jeanie, not knowing it. The party came nearer; their voices became audible from the window, and it annoyed Clare to hear sounds behind her, Mrs. Murray moving about, which prevented her hearing what was said. She uttered an imperative "Hush!" and turned round, half angrily, to command silence; but still she could hear nothing but the well-accustomed tones—the voice she knew so well. "You must see her. She is the prettiest creature," she heard him say just as they passed into the room below; and then Clare loosed Jeanie's hand, and looked at her with a new inspiration. It was not for Alice Pimpernel; it was for Jeanie this visit was made.

"You pretended to be afraid of him when you met him with me," she said sharply, and then turned to the grandmother. "She fainted or something at the sight of him, and now he brings people to make a show of her. How is this?" she cried. "Do you know that this village is mine, and I have the charge of it? I must know what it means. You must explain this to me."

"Miss Arden," said Mrs. Murray, "you mistake me and mine, I canna tell why. I have lived sixty years in this world, and nobody has bidden me humble myself as you have done—though it is justice upon me, but you know nothing of that. I

owe ye no explanation. I am not of your parish nor in your charge; but out of courtesy, and because of something ye never heard of, I'll satisfy you this time. The man is nothing to her nor to me. He was like a man that once we knew, as I told you. But he came here three days ago, and I was glad, for the poor bairn saw it was another face and another voice, and got over her fear. He's clever and soft-spoken, as ye ken; but he should never speak to my Jeanie more, never with my will. That is all I have to say. You should not be here, spying on your kinsman, you that's such a proud lady. You should not watch at that window, nor catch his words unawares. I would do more for you than for anybody in the world that's not my ain——"

"Why do you talk such nonsense to me," cried Clare, angrily. "Am I such a fool as to be deceived by it? What reason have you to care for me? I thought you were proud and gave yourself airs, but I did not think you would make false pretences like this. Why should you care for me——"

"I canna tell ye why, and ye will never ken," said Mrs. Murray with a sigh, "though I would give my life for you or your brother, if that would serve you. But you say well, I have no right to make pretences. You're young and I'm old, Miss Arden,

and when your kinsman is below you should not be watching him here."

"I am not watching him," said Clare; and she sat with an obstinate stateliness by the window, her face deeply flushed, her heart beating high. It was not her fault. She would not have stolen here into this coign of 'vantage had she thought of Arthur. It was but to avoid the Pimpernels, not to watch him. But, even had she known he was coming, would it not have been better in any case to keep out of his way? Had not Edgar left home on purpose to send him away from Arden?—Edgar, whose fault it was, who had thus thrown his cousin into the arms of the Pimpernels, into the way of temptation. Clare was unreasonable, as was natural. She forgot—as it is so easy to forget—that Arthur Arden was much older than her brother, far more experienced, a man doubly learned in the ways of the world. The first thing that occurred to her had been to suspect poor little Jeanie, to blame Mrs. Murray; and now her imagination fell upon Edgar, putting all the responsibility on his shoulders. He had sent his cousin away. It was a new beginning which poor Arthur was making—an attempt, poor fellow, at that pure domestic life which had never been within his reach before. And Edgar, who had all the lands and all the prosperity, had refused to

this other Arden even the poor shelter of his roof—the chance of learning to love something that was better than his past had been. And thus he had been thrown back upon the Pimpernels. To look at these good people in the mirror of Clare's fancy, one would have supposed they were everything that was disorderly and improper, instead of being the most respectable of households, correct in every possible point, and domestic to a degree only possible to a British nature with commercial associations. Clare sat and listened to the hum of voices downstairs with the strangest emotion. What was he doing there? What had he come for? Why was he making himself the attendant of Alice Pimpernel? He had no money, and her father was rich—was he, thwarted in his affections, intent upon marrying and indemnifying himself by securing money at least? All these thoughts passed through Clare's mind with the rapidity of lightning. Very different would have been her brother's thoughts, even of Arthur Arden; but Clare's mind was more sophisticated than Edgar's, and leapt in a moment at this vulgar danger, which to her felt so real. And, as we have said, the idea of marrying for money did not in itself revolt her. If he could not secure the woman he loved, and her fortune, what could he do but at least attempt to secure

another fortune?—something he could live on, and which would give him something to live for. Alice Pimpernel! How much would she have? Clare wondered, in her feverish suspense. Something, surely, not worth the sacrifice—a share of her father's money only—not an estate or ancient barony in her own right.

And then it occurred to her suddenly, she could not tell why, that Old Arden was the seat of an ancient barony. It had dropped away from the family in some of the civil wars; but the Squires had once been Barons, and Lord Arden was a title that might easily be renewed in a generation unfriendly to attainders, and which had a respect for old memories. Should it be Edgar who would bear the recovered title? Edgar, Lord Arden! The idea was absurd somehow. And then, Old Arden was not Edgar's, but hers—hers to bestow. Good heavens!—that it should be so! And all the time, Arthur Arden—he who was the truest representative of the family, in look, and thought, and disposition—he who would be the ideal Lord Arden—was wasting his time upon a cotton-broker's daughter—a Liverpool girl, with a little paltry money—down-stairs! These may have been deemed strange thoughts for a girl who had just seen her lover absorbed in attendance upon another.

She had been miserable enough—angry enough for the first moment. She had loathed the innocent Jeanie, and hated the stupid Alice; but while she thus sat waiting and listening, it was another channel into which her thoughts flowed. It was because he had been sent away from her own side that he was driven to “amuse himself”—poor fellow! And she could give him all that was needful, and the higher life along with it! Clare’s heart beat high with impatience as she heard the sound of the voices. Should she go down and reveal herself? Should she wait? What should she do? It was while her excitement thus gradually grew stronger—after she had risen and seated herself again twice over, and felt herself almost carried away by the torrent of her thoughts—that the stir down-stairs took a definite form; there was a sound of approaching footsteps and voices, which came nearer and nearer. Mrs. Murray divined what it meant sooner than Clare did; and hastily taking Jeanie’s hand, led her into the inner room. “Take your seam, my bonnie lamb, and never you mind what they say or what they do,” said the grandmother; and she closed the door upon her charge, and drew a chair to the table, and took up her own knitting. The room grew suddenly a place full of protection and safety, Clare could not

tell how. The first sensation of fright, and horror, and excitement, at the sound of their approach, died out of her mind. "Thanks," she said, under her breath. And then there came a sudden knock and flutter of voices close by; and Arthur Arden, smiling and introducing the pretty figure of Alice Pimpernel, suddenly appeared at the door.

CHAPTER VI.

CLARE, who knew what was coming, had instinctively changed her position. She had subdued her excitement, as perhaps only a woman could do, and adopted, with the speed of thought, her ordinary air of stately composure. Her look was that of one paying a dignified, yet friendly, visit to a cottage acquaintance, below her in rank, yet not beyond the range of her sympathy. And Mrs. Murray, with feminine skill so natural that it was unconscious, supported her visitor in the emergency. Not a word of explanation passed between them; but yet, they instinctively fell into their parts. Arthur Arden, however, was not in the least prepared for the sight which met his eyes as he opened the door. Partly as making an experiment, to see if it was possible to rouse her, and partly out of sheer idleness and indifference, he had suddenly suggested to Alice Pimpernel to "visit the little beauty" upstairs. "I know the mother; and I want your opinion," he had said. "Oh, Mr. Arden!" had been Alice's reply,

as she buttoned the second button of her gloves; and thus they had come upstairs. But it would be impossible to describe in words how small Arthur Arden felt when he opened the door and found himself suddenly in the presence of his cousin Clare. Though he was a man of experience, and not easily daunted, the sudden sight of her covered him with confusion. Instead of introducing Alice into the room as he had intended, he stumbled into it before her, and changed colour and hesitated like a boy of sixteen. "Miss Arden!" he stammered forth, not knowing what he said; and forgot all about Alice Pimpernel behind him, who tried to peep over his shoulder, and mentally sank upon her knees before the majesty of Clare.

"Yes," said Clare; and then, after a little pause—"Do you want me, Mr. Arden, or Mrs. Murray? Please tell me, and I will go away."

"I wanted—it is nothing—I did not know," Arthur stammered. "Miss Pimpernel was interested—that is, I told her of—— I think you know Miss Pimpernel."

And then, much confused, he stood aside, and made visible Alice, who proffered her shy obeisance, and once more buttoned her glove, too shy to venture to speak. Clare rose, and bowed in her stately way. She was mistress of the situation; and no one could

have told how violently her heart was beating against her side.

"I have paid Mrs. Murray too long a visit," she said. "I must go now. I did not know you were in the neighbourhood, Mr. Arden. You are at the Red House, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Arthur, meekly. "I meant to have let you know—but—— Mrs. Pimpernel is downstairs. I intended to have continued my walk to the Hall to ask how you were——"

"Oh! I am always very well," said Clare; and then there was a pause in the hostilities, and the two armies stopped and looked at each other. Mrs. Murray had taken no notice of the belligerents up to this moment. She had gone on quietly with her knitting, aware that her own charge was in safety. Now she looked up from her work, though without rising from her seat, and turned to the new-comers with a grave face.

"If ye were wanting me, Sir, I would like to know what it was for? I am no used to the ways of the place, and I cannot think I could be of any use."

"Oh, Miss Arden!" said Alice Pimpernel, driven to her wits' end, and feeling that it was now her turn to say something. The girl gave Clare a supplicating glance. "Would she knit something for

mamma—or—— Oh, I don't know what to say !”

And Arthur Arden gave no assistance. He stood speechless among them, cursing his own folly. Clare had all the advantage, whereas he had only the comfort of feeling that he had made himself look like a fool in everybody's eyes.

“I think the young lady has come to see Jeanie,” said Clare.

“But Jeanie is no a show, that folk should come to see her,” said the grandmother. “She is as much thought of and as precious to her own folk as any young lady. It's no that I would be uncivil to them that mean no harm, but my Jeanie is as sacred to me as any lady's bairn.”

“Oh, Mr. Arden !” said poor Alice Pimpernel.

At this moment there was heard in the distance the sound of rustling robes and heavy feet upon the stair, a sound which carried confusion to all bosoms except that of Alice, whose relief when she heard the approach of her maternal guardian was great. Mrs. Pimpernel's cheerful voice was heard before she could be seen. “Well,” she said, “have you seen her, and is she as wonderful as you thought ? Poor thing ! I am sure I am sorry for her, with this stair to go up and down ; and the poor old lady——”

The poor old lady stood confronting Mrs. Pimpernel, who came in very red and heated, and almost fell into her arms. "My good woman, do give me a chair," she cried. "I am nearly suffocated. Oh, Alice and Mr. Arden, what are you doing here? Give me a chair, please. Miss Arden, I declare! How nice it is to meet like this, when one is trying to do the little good one can among the poor! It is so charming of you to take such trouble with your people, Miss Arden. There is really next to nothing left for any one else to do. Might I ask you for a glass of water, my good woman? and wipe the glass first, please. Everything looks very clean, but one never can get quite rid of dust in a cottage. Wipe it well, please."

Clare stood looking on with consternation while these ejaculations were uttered. She had very little sympathy with Mrs. Murray, but yet there was something about her which made Mrs. Pimpernel's easy "my good woman" sound extraordinary enough. "What will she do? Will she scold, or turn her out?" was Clare's question to herself. What Mrs. Murray did was to laugh—a low, soft laugh—which brightened her face as Clare had never seen it, and to bring from a side-table a bottle of water, a glass, and a snow-white napkin. She rubbed the glass for full three minutes, always with a smile upon her

face. "Do you think it clean now?" she said, holding it up with amused demonstration. "If I were at home I would give you better than water; and if you should ever come to Loch Arroch I will be glad to see you—you and yours. Miss Arden, the lady means no harm," the old woman added, turning to Clare, "and she's simple and kind. Why should I no make clean the glass and serve her to drink? She kens no better. I take that easy, easy; but them that would make an exhibition of my poor bairn——"

"I don't think any one meant to offend you," said Clare; and then she turned and bowed to Mrs. Pimpernel, who started from her seat to detain her. "I must go, thank you; I am busy," she said, with another stately gesture of leave-taking to where Arthur and Alice stood together. "Bring Jeanie to see me to-morrow," she added, pausing as she went away. It was an impulse she could not restrain, though Jeanie's part in it was very small. She lingered that there might be a chance for some one else to say something—a possibility. And then she made that chance impossible. "Come up as early as twelve o'clock, please, if she is well enough. I have a great deal to talk to you about." And with these words she hurried away. She would not look at him, or permit any sympathetic glance to open

the way for a word. And yet she had lingered that a look or word might come. Strange inconsistency! She ran downstairs, leaving them above, leaving them together, and went out alone, without saying a word to Sarah or her myrmidons, feeling so lonely, so sad, so solitary, so deserted by heaven and earth! It was right, quite right, of Arthur Arden to make some provision for himself; she had no fault to find with him, not a word to say. But she was very solitary, and very sad. If she only had been spared the sight of it! But no; all her fortitude would be required. He would probably live here in the neighbourhood somewhere after he had married Alice Pimpernel; and he would be well off at least, if not happy! Oh! surely not happy with that insipid creature, who buttoned her gloves and trembled to hear her own name.

Clare hurried along the village street at a pace quite unusual to her; but she had not gone far when she found that she was pursued. She would not look back for the first moment; but, notwithstanding the repugnance in her own mind to turn and speak to him, it was inconsistent to her dignity to be thus followed by her cousin, whom everybody knew. She turned round with the best grace she could muster, and addressed him with her usual manner. "Did you want me?"

she said, and slackened her pace that he might come up.

"It seems so strange that you should ask," said Arthur, "Want you? As if I dared tell you half how much—— But never mind! I went to the Pimpernels' thinking I should be at hand and might have opportunities—— I did not know you were so prejudiced against them. May not I even come to see you while I am there?"

"Being there does not matter much," said Clare, hastily, and then she corrected herself. "Of course, you think me prejudiced and disagreeable," she said; "but I am as I was brought up. Edgar thinks me dreadfully prejudiced. I dare say they are very nice, and all that; but perhaps it would be as well that you did not come to Arden while you were there."

"Why?" said Arthur, in a low voice.

"Why? Oh, I can't tell why. Because I don't like it. Because I am cross and testy, and like to contradict you. Because—— But you know it is no use asking. If a woman is not to choose who she will call on, she must be oppressed and trampled down indeed."

"You are concealing your real objection," said Arthur; and I, who went because I thought—— Why, I met Edgar there! But never mind; of

course, it must be as you please. I said I would stay a fortnight. Must I never come near you all that time? It is very hard. And it is harder still that Edgar should have gone away as he did, breaking all our party up. Do you know, I have never been so happy, not all my life?"

"I am sure you must be quite as happy now," said Clare; "and I hope you will be prosperous in everything you may undertake. Edgar, I am sure, would be very glad to hear, and I—— I do so hope, Mr Arden, that everything you wish will thrive—as you wish——" And here Clare stopped short, breathing quickly, almost overcome by the mixture of despite, and self-restraint, and sorrow for herself, which was in her mind.

"Do you, indeed?" he said. "That is very, very kind of you. It would be kinder still if you knew—but you don't care to know. If I should ever remind you of your good wishes—not now, because I dare not, but afterwards—some time—if I should pluck up courage——"

"I don't think there is any great courage required," said Clare. "Trust me, I shall always be glad to hear that you have done—well for yourself. There could be no more agreeable news. Neither Edgar nor I could have any desire but to see you—happy. Excuse me, I am going to see Miss Somers.

I should ask you to come in too, but she is such an invalid, and I am keeping you from your friends. You may be sure you have my very best wishes—good-bye——”

And Clare held out her hand to him, and smiled a smile which was very proud and uncomfortable. She had not in the least intended to visit Miss Somers, but it would have been utterly impossible for her (she thought) to have walked up all the length of the avenue by Arthur Arden's side. Most likely he would have told her of his progress with Alice. And how could she bear that? It was better to part thus abruptly as long as she was capable of smiling and uttering those good wishes which, she had some faint perception, were gall and wormwood to the recipient. She could see that her benevolent hopes and desires were bitter to him, and it pleased her to see it. Yet, notwithstanding, she still believed in Alice Pimpernel. Why should he be there otherwise? He might not like it to be known until everything was settled—it might be galling to his pride. But still, why should he be there but for that? It was the only possible attraction. And no doubt it was a very sensible thing to do. She hurried across to the doctor's house without looking back, eager to be rid of him—to get away—to forget all about it. And yet not

without a thought that perhaps he would refuse to be dismissed—perhaps would insist upon explaining—perhaps—— But the door opened and closed upon her, and not a word was said to prevent her visit to Miss Somers. When she looked out of the invalid's window Arthur was walking very slowly and quietly down the street to rejoin his friends. This was how it was to be. Well! he had been driven out of Arden, poor fellow! he had been discouraged in his dearer hopes. She herself had been unkind to him; and Edgar had been, oh, how unkind! And he was poor, and must do something to re-establish himself in the world. Was he to blame? Clare clasped her two hands tightly together, and set her lips close that no sigh might escape from them. What alternative was there for him but to act as he was doing; and what for her but to wish him well? And Edgar, too, no doubt, would wish him well—Edgar, who had done it all.

CHAPTER VII.

ARTHUR ARDEN went back to the 'Pimpernels' with no very comfortable feelings. He had gone to the Red House, he said, in order to be near Arden, and that he might make frequent visits to the central object of his pursuit; but he had not been aware how far Clare carried out her principles, and that she really declined to know the people whom she did not think her equals. Arthur was accustomed to people who sneer yet visit and take advantage of all the wealth and luxuries of the *nouveaux riches*. Make use of them: was not that what all the world did, accepting their costly dinners and fine carriages, and laughing at them behind their backs? How was it that Clare refused to do this like other people? Her kinsman could not tell. He thought it foolish of her, if Clare could do anything foolish, and in his own mind quoted the example of a great many very fine people indeed who did it freely. Why should one be so much better than others? he thought to himself;

and so went back disconcerted to join the Pimpernels.

Clare was wrong in the conclusion she had jumped at, and still she was not altogether wrong. Alice was pretty and quite inoffensive, and she would have thirty thousand pounds. When a young man of good family without any money or any profession has arrived at the borders of forty, various questions present themselves to him in a very decided way, and demand consideration. What is to become of him? You may keep time at bay if you have all the aids and preventives at hand for doing so; but when that is not the case, when you have, on the other hand, anxieties instead of cosmetics, and increase your wrinkles by every hour's thought, the crisis is a very formidable one. Arthur Arden had been brought up, like so many young men, with vague thoughts of an appointment which was to do everything for him. This expectation had quieted the consciences of everybody belonging to him. He had been waiting for an appointment as long as he could recollect, and he was still waiting for it now. To tell the truth, the progress of years did not make it more likely or bring it any nearer; but still, he knew a great many people who had in their hands the giving of appointments, and it was not impossible that such

a thing might drop from the skies at any moment. What he would have done with it when it came, after so many years' lounging about the world without anything definite to do, is a different question. But, in the meantime, Alice Pimpernel, as a *pis aller*, was as good as an appointment, and Clare a great deal better, and it seemed only natural that the best should claim his devotion first. He had not attempted to exercise upon Alice the full force of those fascinations which he had poured forth upon Clare; but he kept her in hand, as it were, ready for an emergency. He cleared the cloud off his face as he approached the door of old Sarah's cottage, where the ladies had just appeared. Young Denbigh, the curate, had left them when they went in, so that Arthur was their sole escort. He arrived in time to hear Mrs. Pimpernel's parting words.

"Don't think any more about the loss. It was not very expensive lace, you know, and I have plenty. Thank heaven, I am not in circumstances to be obliged to consider every trifle. I was annoyed at first, of course, and it was dreadfully careless of the girl. What does she expect is to become of her, I wonder, if she takes no more pains? I have known a girl just simply ruined by such carelessness. Oh, you need not cry—crying does very little good. I assure you I have, indeed."

"It's what I'm atelling 'em morning, noon, and night," said old Sarah, while the culprit retired into her apron, and sobbed, and curtsied, being past all power of speech.

"Simply ruined," said Mrs. Pimpernel with solemn iteration; "but I trust you will think what you are doing, and never be so wicked again. I am very much interested in your lodgers, Sarah. What a very nice old woman, and so clean! Mr. Arden did you observe? But there is no use speaking to you gentlemen—you are always thinking of something else. So very clean! If anything should ever be wanted for her or for the sick girl, you may send to me freely. We are never without some little delicacy, you know—something that would tempt an invalid. Mr. Pimpernel is so very particular about what he eats. All you gentlemen are. I dare say you want it more after being out in the world all day knocking about. Well, Mr. Arden, and so you went and made your peace with your cousin? I hope everything is right now."

"Nothing was wrong," said Arthur hastily. I had no peace to make. I was only anxious to ask Miss Arden about—Edgar. I don't know where he is, and I wanted his address."

"She does not half like your staying with us," said Mrs. Pimpernel. "Oh, don't speak to me! I

know better. I don't know what we have ever done to her, but she hates us, does Miss Arden. She is quite spiteful because you are staying with us."

"Oh, mamma, dear!" said Alice, in gentle deprecation.

"You may say what you please, Alice, but I know better. That child is always standing up for Miss Arden. I don't know why she should, I am sure, for she never is barely civil. Not that we want anything from her; we visit quite as much as I wish to visit; but if I were ever so anxious to increase my list, Arden Hall, you know!—— It never was very amusing, I believe. It is not that I care for the airs she gives herself——"

"You forget that my cousin has been brought up very quietly," said Arthur. "Her father was very peculiar. He never saw any society unless he could not help it. You know, indeed, that poor Edgar, his only son—— But that is a painful subject to us all."

"Please, tell me!" said Mrs. Pimpernel. "One hears hints, you know; but it would be so much more satisfactory from one of the family. Do, please, tell me. He snubbed him dreadfully, and never educated him, nor gave him any allowance nor anything. Fancy, his own father! But there must have been some cause."

"He was a very peculiar man," said Arthur Arden. "There are things in families, you know, which don't bear discussion. If I was more hard-hearted than I am, or more indifferent to the credit of the name—— But never mind—it is a question I would rather not discuss."

"Oh, Mr. Arden!" cried Alice Pimpernel, clasping her hands, and looking up at him with unfeigned admiration. Yes, he was more interesting than Mr. Denbigh, with that fine family face, and all its romantic associations—and sacrificing himself, too, for the good of the family. How grand it was! The Pimpernels, too, had certain features which were peculiar to them; but oh! how different from the Ardens. Mr. Denbigh was interesting too—he was very nice and attractive, and second cousin to the Earl of Tintagel. But he had not a story to attract the imagination like this.

"I would never insist upon confidence," said Mrs. Pimpernel; it is against my principles, even with my own child. If it's about money, I always say, 'Speak to your papa—he is the one to manage all that;' and, between ourselves, he is a great deal too liberal; he never knows how to say 'No' to any of them. But if it's their feelings, I never exact anything. I am always ready to do my best, but confidence is a thing I would never exact."

"It is a thing I should be most ready to give," said Arthur Arden, with a bow and a smile, "if the secret were only mine. But my poor cousin Edgar—he is a most worthy fellow—an excellent fellow. I confess I was prejudiced against him, which is not unnatural, you know, considering that he stands between me and—— But really it is a question I must not enter on."

"Anything you may say to us will be sacred, you may be sure," Mrs. Pimpernel said, with breathless interest; and Alice looked up appealingly in his face. They were quite tremulous with expectation, looking for some romance of real life, something more exciting than gossip. Arthur Arden could scarcely restrain the impulse to mystify them at least; but he remembered that it might be dangerous, and refrained.

"No," he said, with a sigh, shaking his head, "not even to you. If it were my own secret you should have it fast enough; but I must not betray another's. No, no. And poor Edgar is an excellent fellow—as good a fellow as ever breathed."

Mrs. Pimpernel shot a lively glance across him at her daughter, who replied to it quickly enough, though she was not over-bright. "Depend upon it, there is some flaw in Edgar Arden's title," was Mrs. Pimpernel's comment that evening when she re-

peated the conversation to her husband. "Depend upon it, all's not right there. I never saw anything written more plainly on a man's face."

"Then you must have seen fool written after it," said Mr. Pimpernel. "Stuff and nonsense! This fellow Arden is very well up to most things. He knows what he's about, does Arden; and so he should, if he's making up to your daughter, Mrs. Pimpernel."

"I wish you would not be so coarse," said the lady. "Making up! There is nothing of the sort. He is an agreeable sort of man, and knows everybody; though, if there was anything in this story, Alice might do worse. It would be very nice to have her settled so near us. And Arden is a good name; and I must say, if there is one thing I am partial to, it is a good family. Though you never will acknowledge it, or give any weight to it, it is well known my grandmother was a Blundell——"

"I don't know anything about your grandmother; but I shan't give your daughter, if I can help it, to a fellow who has nothing. Why don't he get his appointment? Or, if he wants to marry, let him marry his cousin, and get her share of the property. That would be the sensible thing to do."

"He would not look at his cousin, take my word for it," said Mrs. Pimpernel. "He has more sense

than that at least. A proud, stuck-up thing, as vain of her family—— As if it was any virtue of hers to belong to an old family! She wasn't consulted about it. For my part, I'd rather be like Alice, well brought up, with a father and mother she has no reason to be ashamed of, than Clare Arden, with all her mysteries and nonsense. I should indeed; and that is a deal for me to say that am partial to old families. But, if you had a chance, you might just question Arthur Arden a little, and see what he means by it. I don't see why he should sacrifice himself. And if there should be anything in it, to have Alice settled so near us, on such a pretty property——”

Thus Mrs. Pimpernel showed an inclination not only to count her chickens before they were hatched, but even before it was quite certain that there were eggs for the preliminary ceremony. The husband did not say very much, but he thought the more. He had money to back any claimant, and would not hesitate to do so. And as for any folly about self-sacrifice or fine family feeling, the cotton-broker felt that he would make very short work with that. “Rubbish and nonsense!” he said to himself. “What were all the feelings in the world in comparison with a fine property like Arden—a property that might almost double in value if it were in proper hands. Why, in building leases alone, he

could undertake to add five thousand a-year to the property. There might be dozens of Arden Villas, Pimpernel Places, &c., which would pay magnificently, without interfering in the least with 'the amenities,' And if nothing was wanted but money for a lawsuit, why he himself would not mind providing the sinews of war.

"I understand there is some uncertainty about your cousin's title to Arden," he said next morning, in his uncompromising way.

"Good heavens! who said so?" said Arthur, in consternation; for to do him justice he had meant only to be interesting, and knew that, as respected Arden, his suspicions, and those of other people, did not value a brass farthing. "Pray be cautious of repeating such a thing. It is quite new to me——"

"Why, why, why!—I thought you gave a little colour to it at least, by something you said yourself—so I heard," said Mr. Pimpernel. "I am a practical man, Arden, and I never have any time to beat about the bush. *Should* there be anything in it, and *should* you be disposed to fight it out, and *should* you have evidence and all that; why, I should not mind standing by you, as a matter of business, you know. I don't understand fine feelings, but I understand what an estate's worth; and if you can prove to my solicitor you have ground to go upon,

why, I shouldn't mind backing you up. There, I never make mysteries about anything, and you will follow my example, if you take my advice——"

"My dear sir, how can I thank you for your confidence in me?" said Arthur. "The truth is, there has always been something very odd; but I fear that so far as evidence goes—— You may depend upon it, if I ever should find myself in a position to prove anything, yours would be the first aid I should seek."

"Well, well, you know your own affairs best," said Mr. Pimpernel. And so there was no more said about it; but Arthur's brain was set to work as it had never yet been. What if there might be evidence after all—something the old Squire had made up his mind not to use? Arden was worth a great deal of exertion, even a little treachery; and, of course, if Edgar was not a real Arden, it would be a duty to the race to cast him out—a duty to the race, and a duty to himself. Duty to one's self is a very prevailing principle; there is not much about it in the canons of Christianity, but there is a great deal about it in the practical laws which govern the world. Arthur was vaguely excited by this unexpected proposal. He was not lawyer enough to know much of the possibilities or impossibilities of the matter. But it was worth thinking about, worth inquiring into, surely, if anything ever was.

CHAPTER VIII.

“It was with this idea strong in his mind that Arthur marked out for himself a certain scheme of operations during his stay at the Red House. He had still ten days to remain there, and time, it must be allowed, hung sometimes heavy on his hands. To play croquet with devotion for several hours every day requires a mind free from agitation and innocent of scheming—or, at least, not burdened with schemes which are very important—or any warm personal anxiety in the bigger game of life. Alice Pimpernel was good for two hours in the morning, with her little sisters, when they had done their lessons; and Arden felt that it was a very pretty group on the first day of his visit, when he looked up from his newspaper, and let his eyes stray over the well-kept lawn, with its background of trees, and all the airy figures in their light dresses that were standing about. But, then, Alice was good also for four hours in the afternoon, when there was nothing better going on—namely, from half-

past two, when luncheon was just over, till half-past six; when it was time to dress for dinner. Young Denbigh, by right of his youth, was equal to this long continued enjoyment; but Arthur was not equal to it. And, as at that moment there were no other visitors at the Red House, time was hard to kill. He felt that if he had been a little younger he would have been driven, in self defence, to make love to somebody—Alice or her mother, it did not much matter which—but it was too great a bore, with all his anxieties on his mind, and with the amount of real feeling he had in respect to Clare. Accordingly, it was rather a godsend to him when Mr. Pimpernel threw this suggestion into his mind. He did not take it up with any active feeling of enmity to Edgar, nor even with any great hope of success. If it were as he thought, the Squire had either been uncertain to the last of his wife's guilt, or he had been sufficiently infatuated to accept the consequences, finally and irredeemably—in which latter case, no doubt, he must have destroyed any evidence that existed against her; while, in the former case, there could have been no evidence sufficiently strong to convict her. In either point of view, it was madness, after all this lapse of time, to attempt to make any discoveries. Yet Arthur made up his mind to try to do so, with a resolution

which grew stronger the more he thought of it. And from this moment he thought of little else. He had believed his own hypothesis steadily for so many years; and it was so much to his interest to believe it, if proof of any description could be found. He strolled down to the village next morning, not knowing exactly what he wanted, and stopped at old Sarah's cottage, and beguiled her into conversation. Jeanie, he noted, had been sent away at his approach, and this fact alone determined him to see Jeanie. He went upstairs, again, undaunted by the experience of yesterday, and knocked softly at the door of the little parlour. "Mrs Murray," he said from the landing, not even presuming to enter, "I have something to say to Sarah, and I cannot manage it below, with these two girls listening and staring. Would it disturb you to let us come up here?" There was a pause, and a little rustle, as of movement and telegraphed communications, before any answer was made to him; and then Arthur smiled to find that his appeal to Scotch politeness was not made in vain. "Come in, sir," Mrs Murray said, gravely. Jeanie was seated at the open window with her needlework, and her grandmother in her usual place by the table, engaged in her usual occupation of knitting. "Take a seat, sir; we'll leave you to yourselves," said Mrs Murray. But

this did not suit Arthur, who, even in the midst of a new interest, loved to have two strings to his bow.

"By no means," he said; "what I have to say may be said quite well before you. I have to put a question or two about my cousins at the Hall. Here is a chair for you, Sarah; sit down, and don't be frightened. Nothing is going to happen. I want you to tell me what you know about Mrs. Arden, that is all."

"How could I know aught about Mrs. Arden, Mr. Arthur," said Sarah, wonderingly, "when she died afore I come? I took Miss Clare from a baby, but her poor dear mamma was dead and gone. My brother Simon he knows, and so do the Rector, and poor Miss Letty, at the Doctor's; but I don't know no more than this good lady, as is a stranger to the place. There's her name on the stone, top of t'oud Squire's pew in t'church, and that's all as I know."

"Are there none of the old servants about that knew her?" asked Arthur.

At which point a very strange interruption ensued.

"I canna tell, sir, why you are asking, or if it is for good or evil," said Mrs. Murray. "I dinna belong to the place, as Sarah says, nor I'm no one that ought to ken; but I have seen Mrs. Arden, if its about her ye want to ken——"

"You have seen Mrs. Arden!" said Arthur, in amazement; and old Sarah echoed his exclamation.

"Yes, I have seen her; no often, but more than once. If that is all, I can tell you what like she was, and all I ken about her; or, if not all—— She was ill in health and troubled in spirit, poor thing, when I saw her. I cannot think she was ever either strong or gay."

"Was that after her—children were born?" asked Arthur, eagerly.

"It was before she had any bairn. It was thought she never would have one, and her husband was sore disturbed. But, ye see, the doctors turned out fools, as they do so often," Mrs. Murray added hastily, turning and fixing her eyes upon him. She made a pause between the two sentences, and changed her tone completely. The first was mere reminiscence, the other had a certain defiance in it; and Arthur felt there was some meaning, though one he could not read, in the suddenly watchful expression of her eyes.

"Yes," he said, thoughtfully, "so it appears." And as he spoke the watchfulness went off Mrs. Murray's face, and she evidently (though why he could not think) calmed herself down. "So it appears," he repeated vaguely. "She was some time

married, then, I suppose, before my cousin Edgar was born?"

"I have heard say five years," said the old woman, once more rousing up, with a watchful light in each steady eye.

"Ah, then, that's impossible," he said to himself. An idea had been growing in Arthur's mind that the Squire's wife might have been a widow with an infant child—an explanation which would make everything clear, yet save her from the imputation of a capital crime in respect to her husband. That was impossible. He mused on it for a minute or two, and then he resumed his questions.

"Who was Mrs. Arden? I am anxious to know," he said, and then corrected himself, for his tone had been peremptory. "I am thinking of the family history," he added. "She was a stranger, and we don't know even where she belongs to. That will explain my curiosity to you. I am anxious to know."

"She was Mrs. Arden when I saw her, and I ken nothing more," said the Scotchwoman, shortly; and again he noted that her interest had failed. Evidently she knew something which it might possibly concern him much to know, but what kind of knowledge it was remained a mystery to him. He had not even light enough on the subject to guide

him as to what questions he ought to put to her. Old Sarah sat gazing, open-mouthed and full of wonder. Only little Jeanie took no interest in the inquiry. She sat at the window, now dreaming, now working, sometimes playing with a long tendril of the honeysuckle, sometimes pausing to look out from the window. The talk was nothing to her. And Arthur's interest flagged as this pretty figure caught his eye. Why should he attempt to find out anything about Edgar's mother? What difference could it ever make to him? Whereas, here was a human plaything which it would be pleasant to toy with, which would amuse and distract him in the midst of his cares. What a pretty little thing she was! much prettier than Alice Pimpernel—in some things even more attractive than Clare. Ah, Clare! This thought brought him back to his original subject; but yet the other thought was in his mind, and found expression first.

"Your daughter seems better," he said. "I don't think she is frightened for me now; are you, Jeanie? You know I am a friend now. The man must have been a wretch who frightened such a sensitive sweet little creature. I don't think he can have been like me."

"Sir, did ye speak?" said Jeanie, with a start. And she turned to him an innocent, unconscious

face, moved with a little wonder only at the sound of her name.

"No; the gentleman did not speak to you," said her grandmother. "Go ben the house, my darling, where you will be quiet, and away from all clashes. Sir, my bairn is Jeanie to her own folk," she added, as the docile girl withdrew into the inner room, "but no to every stranger that hears her innocent name. It will be kindest of you not to speak to her. The attack might come again."

"I suppose you know your own business best," said Arthur, shrugging his shoulders; "but you seem very foolish about the child. How can I hurt her by speaking to her? To return to Mrs. Arden. She was Scotch, I suppose, as you knew her so well?"

"She was not Scotch that ever I heard; and I did not know her well," said Mrs. Murray, and then there was a pause. "If you'll tell me what you have to do with it, and what you want to know, I will answer you—if I can give you any information," she said with decision. "I may not know what you want to hear, but if you'll tell me what you have to do with it——"

"I am only the nearest relation that Mr. Arden and his sister have in the world," said Arthur, in spite of himself shrinking from her eye.

“And the heir if this bonnie lad should—die—or fail——” This was spoken with an eagerness which puzzled him more and more. He felt that he was put on his defence. And yet there was no indignation in her look. It was guilt of conscience that startled him, and brought the colour to his cheek.

“Well,” he said, crimson and angry with consciousness, “what then? My cousin is much younger, and more likely to live than I am. Nothing can be more unlikely than that I should be his heir. That has nothing to do with what I want to know.”

“Aye, he’s younger than you, and far liker to live. He’s strong, and he’s got a constitution that will bear trouble. *I should ken,*” she said under her breath, whispering to herself. And then she too coloured, and faced him with a certain gleam of fear in her eyes. “Aye,” she repeated, “Mr. Edgar’s a bonnie lad, bless him, and real well and strong. It’s no likely you’ll ever live to be his heir.”

“It is unnecessary to remind me of that; haven’t I just said it?” said Arthur, hastily. “I trust he’ll live a hundred years. That has nothing to do with the matter.”

“A hundred years!” said old Sarah. “That’s a great age. I know’d an ou’d man up Thornleigh

way—but, bless you, Mr. Edgar's young and strong—as like as not he'll live to a hundred. I never heard as he'd anything the matter all his life. It would be a credit to the family, I do declare——”

“And so it would,” said Arthur, with a smile of disdain. “No, you need not be afraid,” he went on, turning again to Mrs. Murray. “I am ten years older than he is. I am a poor devil without a penny, and he has everything. Never mind. I am going to write a book about the family, and that will make me rich. I can't do your favourite any harm——”

“Has he everything?” said the Scotchwoman, earnestly. “You'll no think me presuming, Mr. Arden, but I would like to hear. It's no fair to the rest when everything goes to one. I canna think it is fair. He should share with you a bit of the land, or some of the siller, or one thing or another. And you as sib to the race as he? I would like well to ken——”

“It is very good of you to take my interest so much to heart,” said Arthur, with a certain contempt which was not unmingled with bitterness. “No, nothing comes to me. One cousin is a prince and one is a beggar. That's the way of the world. So you can't tell me Mrs. Arden's name, nor anything about her friends or her family? Had she

any one with her except her husband when you made her acquaintance? What kind of a woman did you take her to be?——”

“I ken neither her name nor her kin, nor nought about her. They were travelling, and no a creature with them, no even a maid—but there might be reasons. She was a young sorrowful thing, sore broken down with a tyrant of a man. That is all I can tell; and whatever was done, good or evil, was his doing, and not hers. It was him that did, and said, and settled everything. I have nothing more to say——”

“It does not sound much,” said Arthur, with an accent of discontent; and then it seemed to him that a certain gleam of relief shot across her face. “And yet you look as if you could tell me more,” he added, with a suspicion which he could not explain. She eyed him as a man fighting a duel might regard his adversary who had just fired upon him, but made no reply.

“With ne’er a maid?—now that’s strange!” cried old Sarah. “That is the strangest of all, saving Mr. Arthur’s presence. And them very words clears it all up to me, as I’ve wondered and wondered many a day. If madam as was, poor soul, had been a lady like the other ladies, there would have been a deal more things for Miss Clare. She

ain't got anything of her mother's, the dear. Most young ladies they have their mamma's rings, or her jewels, or something. They tell you this was my mamma's, or this was my grandmamma's, or such like. But Miss Clare, she hasn't a thing—— And travelling with ne'er a maid? She wasn't a lady born, wasn't Madam Arden; that's as clear as clear——”

“I canna tell ye who she was—she was a broken-hearted thing,” said Mrs. Murray, with some solemnity; “and what was done in her life, if it was good or if it was evil, it wasna her blame.”

This was all Arthur Arden made of his first investigation. He was working in the dark. He went away a short time after, leaving Sarah full of excited questions, to which she received very scanty response. He was a little excited himself, he could not tell why. This woman was a relation of Per-fitt's, which, of course (he supposed), explained her acquaintance with his cousin's mother. But still she was a strange woman, and knew something he was sure that might be of use to him, if he could only find out what it was. What could it be? Could she have been Mrs. Arden's maid, and in her secrets; or had the proud Squire married some one beneath him—some one probably connected with this stranger? It was all quite dark, and no thread

to be found in the gloom. Was it worth his while to try to penetrate that gloom? And he would have liked to see little Jeanie before he left, the pretty creature. He would rather have questioned her than her grandmother. What could the old woman mean by keeping her so persistently out of his way?

CHAPTER IX.

ARTHUR ARDEN strayed through the village street in the stillness of the summer afternoon after this bewildering interview. He did not know what he was to do to carry on his researches. Probably he might light upon some chance information in one of the cottages where there were people old enough to have known Edgar's mother, but this was utterly uncertain, and he might be committing himself for no use in the world. If he went to the Rector or the Doctor he might commit himself still more, and rouse their curiosity as to his motives in an uncomfortable way. What he had to do was to find out accidentally, to discover without searching, a secret, if there was a secret, which must have been carefully hidden for twenty-five years. The chance of success was infinitesimal, and failure seemed almost certain. Probably everything that could throw any light on the subject had been destroyed long since. And then, if he injured Edgar, what of Clare? Was Mr. Pimpernel's support worth Clare's en-

mity? This, however, was a question he did not dwell on, for Arthur satisfied himself that Clare had no need to know, unless by some strange chance he should be successful. And if he were successful, she was not one to stand in the way of justice. But there was not the very slightest chance that he would be successful. It was simply impossible. He laughed at himself as he strolled along idly. If there had been anything better than croquet to do at the Red House he would have gone back to that, and left this wild-goose chase alone; but, in the meantime, there was nothing else to do, and at the worst his inquiries could do no harm.

The church was open, and he strolled in. Old Simon, the clerk, was about, heavily pattering in a dark corner. It was Saturday, and Sally had been helping her father to clean the church. She had gone home to her needlework, but he still pattered about at the west end, unseen in the gloom, putting, as might be supposed from the sound, his dusters and brooms away in some old ecclesiastical cupboard. He had clogs on, which made a great noise; and the utter stillness and shady quiet of the place was strangely enhanced by the sound of those heavy footsteps. Arthur walked down the length of the church, which echoed even under his lighter tread. The light in it was green and subdued,

coming through the foliage and the dim small panes which replaced the old painted glass in the windows. Here and there a broken bit of colour, a morsel of brilliant ruby out of some saint's mantle, or a warm effective bit of canopy-work, interrupted the colourless light. Arden Church had been a fine church in the ancient days, and there were tombs in the gloom in the corners near the chancel which were reckoned very fine still when anybody who knew anything about it came to see them. But knowledge had not made much inroad as yet in the neighbourhood. The old Squire had not been the kind of man to spend money in restoring a church, and Mr. Fielding had not been the kind of man to worry his life out about it. Should young Denbigh survive the croquet and succeed the Rector, it was probable that Edgar would not have half so easy a time in this respect as his father had been allowed to have; but, in the meantime, there had been no restoration, and there were even some high pews, in which the principal people hid themselves on Sundays. The Squire's pew was like a box at the theatre, with open arches of carved oak, and a fireplace in it behind the chairs, and a private passage which led into the park. The impression which the church made upon Arthur Arden, however, was

neither sacred nor historical. He did not think of it as associated for all those hundred years with the fortunes of his race; neither (still less) did he think of it as for all this time the centre of prayer and worship—the place where so many hearts had risen to God. All he thought was, what a curious ghostly look all those unoccupied seats had. The quiet about was almost more than quiet: it was a hush as if of forced stillness—a something in the air that made him feel as if all the seats were full, though nobody was visible, and some unseen ceremonial going on. And the old man in his clogs went clamping, clattering about in the green dimness under cover of the organ gallery. Simon's white smock was visible now and then, toned down to a ghostly grey by the absence of light. Arthur Arden felt half afraid of him as he walked slowly up the aisle. He might have been the family Brownie—a homely ghost that watched over the graves and manes of the Ardens, which Arthur, though an Arden, meditated a certain desecration of. These, however, were sentiments not long likely to move the mind of such a man. He walked slowly up until he found himself opposite the Squire's pew. It was quite near the chancel, close to the pulpit, which stood on one side, and opposite the reading desk, which stood on the other,

like two sentinels watching the approach to the altar. On the wall of the church, almost on a parallel with where the Squire's head must have come when he sat in his pew, was the white marble tablet that bore his wife's name. It was a heavy plain square tablet, not apt to attract any one's attention; and Arthur, who when he was in Arden Church had always been one of the occupants of the stage box, had scarcely remarked it at all. He paused now and read it as it glimmered in the dim silence. "Mary, wife of Arthur Arden of Arden." That was all. The Arden arms were on the tablet, but without any quartering that could have belonged to the dead woman. Evidently she was the Squire's wife only, with no other distinction.

While he stood thinking on this another step entered the church, and looking round Arthur saw Mr. Fielding, who after a few words with old Simon came and joined him. "You are looking at the old pew," the Rector said in the subdued tone that became the sacred place. "They tell me it ought not to be a pew at all if I took a proper interest in Christian art; but it will last my time, I think. I should prefer that it lasted my time. I never was brought up in these new-fangled ways."

"I was not looking at the pew, but at that," said Arthur, pointing to the wall.

"Yes; it is very bad, I suppose," said Mr. Fielding. "We are very far behind, I know, in art. It's ugly, I confess; but do you know I like it all the same. When the church gets dark in a wintry afternoon, these white tablets glimmer. You would think there were angels holding them up. And after all, to me, who am far advanced in life, such names are sweeter than the finest monuments. It is different, of course, with you younger folks."

"I was not thinking of art," said Arthur, "but of the curt way the name is put. 'Mary, wife of Arthur Arden.' Was she nobody's daughter? Hadn't she got a name before she was married? Dying so young, one would think some one must have been living who had an interest in her; but there is neither blazon nor name."

"Eh? What? I don't see anything remarkable in that," said Mr. Fielding. "The others are just the same. Aren't they? I don't remember, I am sure. 'Mary, wife of Arthur Arden.' Yes; that is all. Now that I think of it, I don't remember Mrs. Arden's name. I never knew what family she belonged to. They were married abroad."

"And their son was born abroad. Was not that strange?" said Arthur. "There seems to have been a great deal of mystery about it one way and another—not much like the Arden ways."

"You have been listening to Somers," said Mr. Fielding, hotly; "pestilent old cynic as he is. He has taken up his notion, and nothing will make him give it up. If you had known Mrs. Arden as I did, you would have scouted such an idea. I never knew a better woman. She had dreadfully bad health——"

"Was that the reason why they were so much abroad?"

"I can't tell why they were so much abroad," said the Rector, testily. "Because they liked it, I suppose; and let me tell you, it would have been better for all the Ardens had they been more abroad. I suppose there never was a more bigoted, self-opinionated race. To be sure you are one of them, and perhaps I ought not to say it to you; but you have knocked about the world, and you know them as well as I do——"

"I knew only the old Squire," said Arthur, "and my own father, of course; but he had knocked about the world enough. There was not much love lost between them, I think——"

"They hated each other, my dear sir—they hated each other," said the Rector; and then he paused and wiped his forehead, as if it had been too much for him. "I beg your pardon, I am sure, for calling up family matters. I am very glad to see

you on such different terms with the young people here——”

“Yes,” said Arthur, with a half sigh. “What is the use of keeping up rancour? The old Squire on the whole was rather kind to me. I suppose it was enough for him to have one Arden to hate. And as he transferred the feeling from my father to his own son——”

“Hush—hush—hush,” said the Rector, anxiously. “Don’t let us rake up old troubles. Thank heaven poor Edgar is very comfortable now. His father couldn’t do him any tangible injustice, you know; though that business about Old Arden was very shameful, very shameful—there is no other word for it. To take advantage of the boy’s ignorance to break the entail, and then to settle the very oldest of the property on Clare! I love Clare dearly—if she was my own child I could not love her more; but rather than take that from my brother, I would strip myself of every penny if I were in her place. It was shameful—there is no other word——”

“My cousin is much more of an Arden than her brother,” said Arthur. “I don’t see why she should strip herself of every penny? Surely he has enough. She is twice as much of an Arden as he.”

“And what is an Arden, I should like to know,”

said Mr. Fielding, "to be kept up at such a cost? Edgar is not much of an Arden, poor boy! He is worth a dozen of any Ardens I ever knew——"

"You forget I am one of that unfortunate race," said Arthur, with a forced laugh. "Oh, no harm! I know you don't love us less, but only him more. And my cousin Clare is an Arden," he added, after a pause; "for her I must make a stand. Even beside her brother's excellence, you would still allow her a place, I hope."

"I love Clare dearly," said the Rector, with abrupt brevity. And then there was a pause. Arthur Arden smiled to himself—a smile which might very well have been a sneer. What did it matter what the old parson's opinions were? The Ardens could stand a harder judgment than his.

"But about this poor lady," he said. "She was a perfect creature, you say, and I don't want to contradict you. Probably she was everything that was good and lovely; but I suppose a woman of no family, from the evidence of this record here?"

"I don't know anything about her family," said Mr. Fielding, shortly. "It never occurred to me to think what her family was." This he said with some heat and energy, probably because it was—and alas! the good Rector knew it was—a considerable fib. Time was when he had asked a great deal

about Mrs. Arden's family—as, indeed, everybody in the county had done; but without gaining any information. The Rector was angry with himself for the fib; but still maintained it, with a certain irritation, as it was natural for a man to do.

“It is a pity there should be so much mystery,” said Arthur, quietly. Of course, he saw through the fiction with the utmost distinctness; but civility required that he should take no further notice. And then the two stood together for a minute or, perhaps, two, in the narrow aisle, pretending to look round them, and making a critical survey of the church. “That tomb is fine, if one could see it,” Arthur said, pointing to a recumbent figure of an old Arden; and Mr. Fielding assented with a little nod of his head. And all this time old Simon, in his clogs, with the smock that looked grey-green in the dimness, was clamping slowly about, stirring the slumbrous, silent echoes. How strange it was—so real and living and full of so many seeds of excitement; yet all the time like something in a dream.

The Rector, however, accompanied Arthur out with pertinacity, seeing him, as it were, “off the premises”—as if there could have been anything to find out in the little innocent church, which all the world was free to inspect. Was it to keep him from talking to old Simon?—who, however, knew

nothing—or was it from mere wantonness of opposition? The latter was really the case, though it was difficult even to make out how Mr. Fielding was stimulated into opposition. He must have felt it in the air, by some curious magnetic antipathy, for Arthur had not said a word, so far as he was aware, to betray himself. They walked together as far as the Hall gates, talking of various indifferent matters. “Living at the Red House!” said Mr. Fielding, with a smile of strange satisfaction. “Does Miss Arden know?” The Rector was pleased with this bit of information. He was glad of anything which would set their kinsman wrong with the brother and sister. It was a highly unchristian sentiment, but so it was.

“Yes, she knows,” said Arthur, quietly. “I met her yesterday; and I am going to call there now. I suppose, as Clare is my cousin, and I am old enough to be her father, I may be permitted to call——”

“Yes, I suppose you are old enough to be her father,” Mr. Fielding said, with most provoking acquiescence. Arthur could have knocked the Rector down, had he given way to his feelings. After all, though there was a good deal of difference in point of age, it would have been difficult for him to have been Clare’s father. And he did not feel like her

father in the smallest degree. The Rector paused at the Hall gates, and looked at his watch to see if he had time also to pay a visit to Clare; but, to Arthur's intense relief, the man-of-all-work came running across from the Rectory as Mr. Fielding hesitated. Some one who was ill had sent for the Rector—some one who lived two miles off—and who had sent so urgent an appeal that Jack had already put the saddle on his master's sturdy old cob. "I shall have to put it off till to-morrow," Mr. Fielding said, with a sigh. "Tell Clare I shall see her to-morrow." But alas! (he thought to himself) an antidote given twenty-four hours after the poison, what good is it? And he could not forbid her own cousin to pay her a visit. So Mr. Fielding turned away with a bad grace to visit his sick parishioner; and Arthur, much relieved, opened the little postern gate, and took his way under the great elms and beeches to the Hall.

CHAPTER X.

CLARE was all alone when Arthur reached the Hall. She had been all alone the whole day. She had not even received a letter from anybody, to help her through its long hours. She had looked after her accounts, and arranged something for the schools, and answered an application which some one in Liverpool had made in respect to one of the girls whom old Sarah had trained. And then she sat down and read for half-an-hour, and then rose and stood for ten minutes at the window, and then had taken her tapestry-work, and then gone to the window again. From that window the view was very fair. It would have lightened the burden off the shoulders of many a careworn man and woman only to have been able to go and look at it from time to time in the midst of their work. There were the woods, in all their summer wealth, stretching as far as the eye could see; and under their shade a gleam of water catching the sunshine—water which was one of the charms of Arden—a

series of old fish-ponds threaded upon the thin silvery string of a little stream. It glimmered here, and it glimmered there, through the rich foliage—and now and then the elms and beeches stood apart, as it were, drawing their leafy skirts about them, to open a green glade, all brightened up with a flash of that fairy water; and between the window and the wood was the great wealthy stretch of immemorial turf, the park, with here and there a huge tree standing with modest consciousness by itself—a champion of the sylvan world. People had been heard to say, that the mere sight of all that lordly, silent scene—so profuse in its verdure, so splendid in its space and freedom—was enough to drive care and pain far from Arden. Nothing knew Nature there of pain or evil. She lay and contemplated herself, wrapped in a holy, divine content, listening to the rustle of the leaves, taking thought for the innumerable tiny lives that buzzed and fluttered in the air, watching the grasses grow and the little fish leap. It was all very lovely, and to Clare it was dear, as only such a home can be. But when she went to the window her heart grew sick of the silence and the calm. Oh, only for a little movement and commotion! A storm would have been better than nothing; but still a storm would only have moved these great, strong, self-sufficing, un-

sympathetic trees. It could not have given the *secousse* she wanted to Clare herself, who, for the first time in her life, had ceased to be self-sufficing. No, not self-sufficing—longing for anything, it did not matter what, to disturb the stagnation about her. How different it had been before Edgar came home! Even when she was absorbed by her first grief for her father, time did not hang heavy on her hands. Once before, it is true, a similar feeling had come over her—after Arthur Arden went away the first time. Clare clasped her hands together and blushed crimson, with sudden shame, when she identified the previous moment at which she had felt lonely and weary of everything as she was now: violent shame seized upon her—though there was nobody to see, even if any one could have seen into her mind and surprised the unspoken thought. And then she turned her back upon the weary window, and represented to herself that the misery of that former time had passed away. Time had gone on, and other thoughts had come in, and it had passed away. A little patience, and again it would pass away now. Everything does in this world.

Clare's experience was not great, but yet even she knew something of that terrible tranquillising force of time. How wretched she had been about Edgar, again and again, during those years when he had

been absent, and her father never mentioned his name. But these wretchednesses had all floated away, one after another. And when the Squire died, it had seemed to Clare that she never could get beyond that sense of desolation which filled the house and all the familiar scenes in which he had been the first figure. But she had got over it. She had not forgotten her father; her memory of him was so vivid that she could think she saw him, could think she heard him, so clear in her recollection were his voice and his face. And yet the world was no longer desolate because he was not there. It was a curious train of thought for a girl of her age. But Clare was very reasonable, and she was very much alone, with nobody in the world to whom she could legitimately go for consolation. She had no mother into whose ear she could pour her woes; she had been compelled to be a mother to herself. And thus, as if she had been her own mother, she represented to herself that this pain also would pass away in time. Let her but occupy herself, keep doing something, bear it as patiently, and think as little about it as possible, and in time it would come to an end. This is a hard, painful, inhuman way of consoling one's self; but yet when one is alone, and has nobody else to breathe a word of comfort, perhaps it is as good a way as any. "It will not

last," she said to herself. "It is miserable now, and shameful, and I hate myself. To think that *I* should feel like that! But one has only to be patient and put up with it. It cannot last." And she had justified herself with this philosophy, and taken what nourishment she could out of it, when all her loneliness, and miserableness, and philosophisings were put to flight in a moment. Arthur Arden was ushered in solemnly by Wilkins, who had half a mind to remain himself, to make sure that the rules of perfect propriety were observed; and all at once the tedium and the unprofitableness departed out of Clare's life.

But she would have given her life, as was perfectly natural, rather than let him see that his arrival was anything to her. "I am taking advantage of Edgar's absence to do quantities of things," she said, looking into his face, "clearing away my old pieces of work. No, perhaps I was never very fond of work; I have always had so many other things to do.—Thanks; I heard from him yesterday; Edgar is quite well."

"I hope he is enjoying himself in town," said Arthur, subduing himself to her tone.

"He talks only of the Thornleighs," said Clare, with that familiar pucker in her brow. Pretending to be anxious about Edgar was so much more easy

than adopting that air of absolute calm for herself. "Of course I know I ought to be very glad that he has chosen such nice friends. There is nothing to object to in the Thornleighs. Still, to go to town only to see them, when he can see them as much as he pleases at home——"

"Lady Augusta, I should think, likes to have such a captive at her chariot-wheels," said Arthur. "How much anxiety it must cost you! Poor dear Arden! What a pity he knows so little of the world."

"Oh, my brother will do very well," said Clare, with a sensitive movement of offence; and then it occurred to her that it was safest to carry the war into the other camp. "I should like to know how you get on at the Red House?" she said. "Miss Pimpernel is quite pretty, I think. Is she always buttoning her glove? I hear they play croquet a great deal. Are you fond of croquet, Mr. Arden? If you are, it must have been so dull for you, never having it while you were here."

"I hate croquet," he said, almost rudely (but Clare was not offended). "I hope the man who invented it died a violent death. Miss Arden, I know I have put myself in a false position by going to visit the Pimpernels——"

"Oh, no, indeed no, not at all," said Clare, with

majestic suavity ; “ why should not you visit them if you like them ? I object to visiting that sort of people myself, you know. Not that they are not quite as good as I am—but—— And then one acts as one has been brought up. I never supposed it was a wrong thing to do——”

“ It would not be right for you,” said her cousin. “ With us men, of course, it don’t matter ; but you —— I should not like to see you at the Red House with a mallet in your hand. I must not tell you my motive in going there, I suppose ?”

“ Oh, please, do,” said Clare, with queenly superiority, but a heart that beat very quick under this calm appearance. “ I think I can divine—but you may be sure of my interest—in whatever concerns you. Miss Pimpernel is very pretty ; she has the loveliest complexion. And I was not in earnest when I spoke about—buttoning her glove.”

“ Why should not you be in earnest ? She does nothing but button her glove. But I don’t know what Miss Pimpernel has to do with it,” said Arthur, putting on an air of surprise. He knew very well what she had to do with it. He understood Clare’s meaning at once, and he knew also that there was a certain truth in the suggestion. If he was utterly foiled concerning herself, he was by no means sure that Alice Pimpernel was not

the next best ; but he put on an air of surprise, and gravely waited for a reply. Clare, however, was not quite able to reply. She smiled, and waited till he should say more. It was the wisest and the safest way.

“I think, after what you have implied, I must tell you why I am at the Pimpernels,” he said, after a pause. “It was very silly of me, of course ; but I never thought—— In short, I did not know you were so consistent. I thought you would do as other people did, and that you visited them like the rest of the world. All this, Miss Arden, I told you before ; but I don’t suppose it was worth remembering. When your brother turned me out——”

“Mr. Arden, you forget yourself ; Edgar never turned any one out. Why should he ?” said Clare ; and then she stopped, and said to herself—“ Yes ; it was quite true.”

“Of course, I could not expect he was to stay here for me ; but he did turn me out. And very right too,” said Arthur, sadly. “He divined me better than you did. Had I been Edgar, and he me, I should have done just the same.”

“I do not understand you, Mr. Arden,” said Clare, raising her lofty head. “Edgar is the very soul of courtesy and kindness. You do not understand my brother.” She knew so well that she

was talking nonsense, and he knew it so well, that here Clare paused, confused, not able to go on with her fiction under his very eye.

"Well," he said, with a sigh, shaking his head, "we must not discuss that question. I could throw light upon it perhaps, but for the present I dare not. And I thought in my stupidity that the Red House was near Arden. I find it is a thousand miles away. Is not that strange? Miss Arden, I am going to do something genealogical, or historical. I think I will write a book. Writing a book, people say, is a very nice amusement when you don't know what to do with yourself, and if you happen to be rather wretched now and then. I am going to write something about the family. I wonder if Edgar and you would let me see the old family papers—if any papers exist?"

"To write a book!" said Clare. Miss Arden had rather a contempt for literature; but to write a book which was not for money, like the books of professional authors, but about "the family," like so many handsome books she had seen—a glorification, not of one's self to be sure, but of one's ancestors—was a different matter. A slight, very slight, rose-tint came upon her pale face. It was not the kind of flush which appeared when Arthur Arden talked of other subjects. It was a thrill of

pleasurable excitement—a movement of sudden interest and pride.

“If you will permit me to see what papers there are,” said Arthur; “I know there are some which must be interesting, for I remember your father—— He was peculiar in some things, Miss Arden; but how full of knowledge and power he was!”

“Oh, was not he?” cried Clare, with sudden tears in her eyes. “Poor papa! Poor dear papa! I think he knew everything. Mr. Arden, it is so kind of you to speak of him. No one ever speaks of him to me. People think it brings one’s grief back—as if one would not give the world to have it back! And Edgar and I—poor Edgar!—he can’t talk of him as—as most children can. You know why: it is no one’s fault. Perhaps if I had been a little more firm—— But, oh, it is so kind of you to talk to me of papa!”

“I did not mean to be kind,” said Arthur Arden, with a sudden compunction, feeling his own treachery. “But perhaps I knew him better than Edgar could,” he added, gently. “And he loved you so—no child was ever more to a father. But I should not say anything to make you cry——”

“I like to cry,” said Clare. “I have not cried for months, and it does me so much good. Nobody

ever loved me as poor papa did. I am not blaming any one. Edgar is very fond of me, Mr Arden—he is very fond of me and very good to me—but you know—papa——”

“He was like no one else,” said the traitor ; and, good heavens, he asked himself, am I putting all this on by way of getting possession of her father’s papers ? What a horrible villain I must be ! But he did not feel himself a villain. He went on talking about the Squire with the profoundest seriousness, and feeling what he said, though he was conscious of his own motive all the time. It was frightful to think of, but yet thus it was. And Clare, who had so much emotion pent up within her—so much which she would have been ashamed to trace to its just source, and which nothing in the world would have persuaded her to show—when the fountains of her heart were thus opened, and a feasible occasion given her, Clare’s whole being seemed to flow forth. She talked of her father, and felt that of him alone could she thus have talked. And her tears flowed, and were dried, and flowed again. Not all for her father—a great deal for herself, for the complications of her own life—for nameless agitations and trouble. But this one legitimate reason for weeping relieved them all.

“How stupid I am,” she said at last, “entertain-

ing you with my silly crying, as if that could be anything to you. Mr. Arden, I don't think you need wait for Edgar's leave. I am sure he would let me give it. I don't know whether the papers are interesting—but there is that old bureau in the library. It was papa's bureau—he always used it as long as he lived. I have never said anything about it, and I have never had the heart to go over them myself: but there are quantities of letters in it. I suppose they ought to be burnt. If you find anything that interests you, I might go over papa's papers at the same time—it would be something to do——”

“ And I shall be at hand, if you want anything,” said Arthur. Was it possible he was to get his wish so easily? This poor little lamb did not even wait to be asked, she thrust her milk-white head into the wolf's mouth. The papers; not only those old papers which he had pretended to want, but any windfall of modern letters that might fall in his way—and not only this, but Clare's society, and full opportunity to work upon her as he might. He could not believe it was true as he went away. It was his first visit, and he would not stay too long, nor run any risk. He left her, as it were, on the verge of a new world. To-morrow even might bring forth results more important than anything that had

yet dawned on his life—to-morrow he might discover something which would put Arden within his reach—or to-morrow's chances might place Clare within his reach, the next thing to Arden. His head throbbed with excitement and his heart with hope.

As for Clare, she too was on the verge of a new world—but it was one of excitement and emotion only. Her dull life quickened into sudden radiance. She looked out again from the window, and saw the silvery water gleaming, and the branches waving, and all the face of nature gay. The day had brightened, the world grown cheery—and to-morrow, with new things in it, new companionship, new work, new interests, smiled and invited her. She did not say even to herself "I shall see him again." On the contrary, she thought of her father and his papers, and the melancholy pleasure of setting them in order. It would be, of course, a melancholy pleasure; and yet she caught herself singing as she ran upstairs to get her hat, and go out for a walk. Could it be this prospect only which made her heart so light and so gay?

CHAPTER XI.

THE next day was one of excitement for Clare. She began it with feelings so changed from that of the previous morning, when life had seemed nothing but tedium and heaviness to her, that it was difficult to imagine that she was the same creature. The calm composure of her earlier days, when no new incident was wanted to break the pleasant blank of existence, was as different from this new exhilaration as it was from the heavy, leaden dulness of the time which was just over. She had wanted nothing in the first serenity of her youth. She had seemed to want everything in the monotony of her loneliness after her brother and her cousin had left her. And now, again, she wanted nothing—except——

Except—— She did not say to herself what it was; or if she did she called it by other names. Something to do—something to interest her—a little society in the midst of her solitude. She did not say, I am happy because he is coming. A girl must have gone a long way on that path before she

will say as much to herself ; but a sense that he was coming seemed to be in the air—the sunshine was brighter for it, the morning was sweeter, all kinds of lovely lights and gleams of life and movement were upon the park—the very scene which yesterday had been so unbearably still and motionless. The hours did not seem long till he came, but glided past with the softest harmony. She rather felt disposed to dwell upon them—to lengthen them out—for were they not all threaded through with that thread of expectation which made their stillness rosy ? It fretted her a little to have this enchanted quiet broken by Mrs. Murray, though she came according to an appointment which Clare had forgotten. The girl's brow clouded over with impatience when this visitor was announced to her. " Yes, I remember," she said sharply to Wilkins. " Let her come upstairs. I told her to come." But it was a little relief to Clare's mind to find that her visitor was alone, which supplied her at once with a legitimate cause of offence.

" You have not brought Jeanie with you ?" she said. " Is she ill, or what is the matter ? I so particularly wished her to come !"

" I had a reason for no bringing her ; and in case it should be made known to you after, and look like a falseness, I have come to tell you, Miss Arden,"

said Mrs. Murray. "Your house, no doubt, is full of pictures of your father. It is but right. I saw one down the stair as I came in at the door——"

"And what then? What has papa's picture to do with it?" asked Clare in amaze.

"You would think, little enough, Miss Arden," said Mrs. Murray. "That is just what I have to tell you. Ye'll mind that my cousin Thomas Perfitt has been long in the service of your house. And Jeanie has seen your father, and it made her heart sore——"

"Seen my father!" said Clare, with wonder, which was not so great as her visitor expected. "I did not know you had been here before."

"We were never here before. Where we saw your father was at Loch Arroch in our own place. I knew him before you were born, Miss Arden—when I was—no to say young, but younger than I am now; and your mother, poor lady, too——"

This she said sinking her voice, so that Clare with difficulty made it out.

"My mother, too!" she cried, "how strange, how very strange, you should never have told me this before!"

"I canna think you will say its strange, if ye consider," said the Scotchwoman; "plenty folk here must have seen your mother. It's no as if you were ignorant—and it's no as if I had anything to say

but as I've been led to say it to others, I wouldna have you think there was a falseness. She was young, and she was feeble, poor thing, when I saw her. It's more than five and twenty years ago, when him that's now Mr. Arden had but lately come into this weary world."

"You speak in such a strange way," said Clare—"him that's now Mr. Arden! Do you mean my brother Edgar? He is just twenty-five now."

"He was but an infant, and well I mind it," said the old woman, shaking her head with mournful meaning. "It was a sore time to me—death and trouble was in my house; and, oh, the trouble and the deaths I have had, Miss Arden! To hear of them would frighten the like of you. But first I must tell you why I canna bring Jeanie here. Two years ago, or may be more—two months more, for it was in the month of April—your father came to see me. Him and me, I told you, had met before. There were things I kent that were of consequence to him, and things he kent that were of consequence to me. Jeanie and her brother Willie—a bonnie blythe laddie—were both about the house. Willie was a sailor, sore against my will; and, oh, Miss Arden, so bonnie a boy! Your father was real kind. It's been hard, hard to bear—but he meant to be kind. He got my Willie a ship out of Liverpool

The poor laddie went away from us—it's two years this June—as blythe as ony bridegroom; and, Miss Arden, he's never come back——”

“Never come back!” Clare's wonder was so great that she repeated the last words without any real sense of their meaning, as she would have repeated anything that made a pause in this strange narrative. Her father! She seemed to herself to possess his later life—to know its every detail—to hold it, as it were, in her hands. He had never done anything without telling her—without consulting her, she would have said. Yet here was a secret of which she knew nothing. She was not selfish, but her mind was not so readily open to the affairs of others as was that of her brother. She never thought of the young sailor, or of the old mother, who spoke so sadly. She thought only of her father and his secret. What were the others to her? Of course she would have been sorry for them had their sorrows been sufficiently impressed on her imagination. But in the meantime it was her father she was thinking of, with bewildering wonder and pain.

Mrs. Murray, on the other hand, was absorbed with her own part of the tale. “He never came back,” she repeated, with a thrill of agitation in her voice. “He was lost in the wild sea, far out of our

reach. Oh! it might have happened a' the same. It might have come to the innocentest woman as it came to me. Many a lad is lost, and many a family brought to mourning, and naebody to blame. But when I think of all that's been in my life, and that the like of that should come by means o' the one man!—— That is how Jeanie knew your father, Miss Arden. She took your cousin for him, and it made her wild. I daurna bring her here to pain her with his picture. She was aye a strange bairn all her life, and Willie's loss made her all wrong. That's what I came to tell you, to be honest and clear o' reproach. I'm no good or without guilt, that I should say so—but, oh, I hate a lie!"

Clare scarcely heeded this exclamation. She did not realise it, nor occupy herself about what her visitor felt. There was so much in this revelation that concerned herself that she had no leisure for other people's feelings. "I do not see how you could blame papa," she said, almost coldly; "of course, he did it for the best. How was he to know the ship would be lost? I am sorry, but I think it very strange that you should suppose it was his fault. Jeanie ought to be told how foolish it is. Papa would not have hurt any one—he would not have been cruel to—a fly."

Here Clare paused with a good deal of natural

indignant feeling. Was the woman trying to make some claim upon her, to establish a grievance? It was a kind thing her father had done. He had taken the trouble to interest himself about it without even telling his daughter. And then they were discontented because the ship was lost. How unreasonable, how preposterous it seemed! "Nothing must be said about my father which I ought not to hear," she said after a pause. "No words can say how fond I was of papa. He was everything to me; he was so good to me. He never had any—secrets from me. No, I am sure he had not! He did not speak of you, because perhaps—— For he was not one to blazon his own kindness, or—— And then he might forget. Why should he speak to me of you?"

"You think we are humble folk, no worthy to be thought upon," said Mrs. Murray with a half smile. It was not sneering, but pitying, very grave and very sad. "And that's true—that's true. What was a life more or less in a poor farmhouse so long as the grand race ran on? You are very like your father, Miss Arden—that was the very way his thoughts ran——"

"His thoughts were always kind and good," said Clare, hastily; and it was hard, very hard for her in the agitation of the moment to resist a girlish

inclination to burst into tears. It was so ungrateful, she would have said—so cruel and unkind. What! because a kind service was done, which brought on painful results, was it the benefactor that was to be blamed? “If Jeanie were to be ill now, you might just as well say it was my doing,” she added in her suppressed passion, and felt that she disliked the very looks of this stranger and her monotonous Scotch voice.

Then there was a long pause. Clare turned over all the books on the table before her—took up and put down her work—twisted the wools about her fingers till her anger had somewhat evaporated. Mrs. Murray sat at a little distance from her, saying nothing. Her eyes were fixed on a portrait of Clare, taken a year or two before, which hung on the wall. She looked at it with a wondering interest, growing more and more earnest in her attention. “You are like *her*, too,” she said at length, with a certain astonishment. The portrait was not like Clare at that moment. It was Clare in repose, when gentler thoughts were in her mind. “You are like *her*, too,” Mrs. Murray resumed, with a little eagerness. “I could not have thought it. But you’re no one to let your heart be broken without a word, the Lord be praised.”

“What do you mean? If it is of mamma you

are speaking, it is my brother who is like her," said Clare, haughtily, "and I should be glad if you would not meddle any further with our affairs."

"Eh, if I could but let them alone, and never think of them more!" The Scotchwoman rose as she said this, with a deep and prolonged sigh. Without another word she went to the door. "I will come to you if you send for me, Miss Arden, if I'm ever wanted in this house," she said, "but no for any other reason. I would forget if I could that there ever was man or woman bearing your name. But the past cannot be forgotten, and I'll come if I am ever wanted here."

With these words she went away. Something solemn was in them, something which was incomprehensible, which sounded real, and yet must be absolute folly, Clare thought. Why should *she* be wanted at Arden? What could she ever do to affect the house? No doubt there were people still living in the world who believed in revenge, and would hunt down (if they could) a man who had injured them. But what revenge could this woman carry out upon the Ardens? It was a piece of folly—a mere dream. Clare laughed at the thought that Mrs. Murray could be wanted—that she could be sent for to Arden. But her laugh sounded harsh to herself. She resented the whole

matter, the visit, the uncalled for narrative, the almost threat, the interruption of her pleasant thoughts. And then the question would come back—What had been the tie between her parents and this woman? She remembered so clearly her father's absence from home two years ago. He had told her he had business in London—and he had gone to Scotland instead! How very strange it was! The more Clare thought of it the more angry she grew. If he had secrets—if he did things she was not to know—what right had any one to come and tell her now, when he could no longer explain the matter, and all his secrets were buried with him? She had her hand on the bell, to send for Mr. Perfitt, and question him what sort of woman this was whom he had brought to Arden to perplex and vex everybody. And then she remembered Sally Timms' gossip, and tried to think evil thoughts. To some people it comes natural to think ill of their neighbours; but Clare was too spotless and too proud for such a tendency. She did not believe any harm of Mrs. Murray, and yet she tried to believe it. And then she tried to laugh once more and dismiss the whole matter from her mind; and then——

It was the clock striking two which roused her, and the entrance of Wilkins with the little

luncheon tray, which furnished her doleful, solitary, little meal. This roused her out of her resentment and her dreams—not that she was tempted by the chicken's wing, or even the strawberries among their cool green leaves; but that the morning was over, and the second chapter of the day, as it were, about to commence. And that second chapter had the hero in it, and all the nameless sweet agitations that would come with him—the fancies and visions and expectations which distinguish one phase of life, and make it more enthralling than any other. After a while that other step would disturb the silence, and all the world would brighten up and widen, she could not tell why. Not because of Arthur Arden, surely. He was no prince of romance, she said to herself. She entertained (she assured herself) no delusions about him. He was very agreeable to her—a man who pleased her—a true Arden; but she did not pretend to think him a king of men. Therefore, it could not be her cousin whose coming was to change everything. It must be the pleasant work she was about to begin with him—the common family interest—the intercourse with one who almost belonged to her—who was always ready to talk, and willing to discuss anything that caught her interest. Very different from being alone, and worrying over

everything, as people do who have no one to confide their troubles to. She would tell her cousin about Mrs. Murray, and thus get rid of the thought. This was what lightened the cloud from about her, and brought back the atmosphere to its original clearness. It was so pleasant to have some one to talk to—one of the family, to whom she could venture to say anything. Of course, this was all; and it was enough for Clare.

CHAPTER XII.

ARTHUR ARDEN was punctual to his appointment : he had thought of little else since he left Arden the day before. To do him justice, Clare's society, the power of approaching her as he would, was very sweet to him, especially after a severe course of croquet at the Red House, and a few days with the Pimpernels. In short, he was able to disguise to himself his other motive altogether, and to forget he had any clandestine object. "I am going to look over some old family papers with my cousin," he had said to Mrs. Pimpernel, who, for her part, had not much liked the information. "If he is going to make a cat's-paw of us, and spend all his time running after that proud stuck-up thing!" she said to her husband. "Our Alice is worth two of her any day; and I don't hold with your family papers." "We haven't got any, have we?" said Mr. Pimpernel; "but you wait a bit, Mary; I know what the family papers mean." "I hope you do, Mr. Pimpernel," said his wife, with evident scepti-

cism. And she did not like it when Arthur Arden, instead of joining Alice at her croquet, or attending herself upon her drive, went off again after luncheon to visit his cousin. "If that is the way of it, I don't see the good of having a gentleman in the house," she said to Alice. "But then there is Mr. Denbigh, mamma," said Alice, innocently, for which her mother could have boxed her ears.

And Arthur turned his back upon them and their croquet ground with the intensest satisfaction. It was very heavy work. He had been in a great many country houses, and he had occasionally felt that in his position as a man without any particular means or advantages, a good deal of exertion had been required from him in payment for the hospitality he received. He had seen the justice of it, and in a general way he had not made much objection. But then these were houses full of people where, if a man made himself generally useful, every necessity of the circumstances was satisfied, and he was not compelled to devote himself specially to stupid or wearisome individuals. He had the sweet along with the bitter, and he had not complained. But to be told off for Mrs. Pimpernel's personal service or for croquet was a different matter, and he turned his back upon them with a light heart. And when the door of the old heredi-

tary house opened to him, and Clare, like one of the pictures from the walls, rose with a little tremulous expectation, holding out her hand, the difference was such that it confused his mind altogether, and made him conscious of nothing but intense relief. Look over family papers! oh, yes; or mow the lawn, if she liked, or work in the garden. He said to himself that the one pretext would be just as good as the other. It was a pretext, not any intended treachery, but only a means of being near Clare.

"Would you like to go to the library at once?" she said. "I have just glanced at the papers poor papa arranged on the top shelves of his bureau. All his own letters and things are below. Shall we go to the library at once?"

"I am not in a hurry," said Arthur; "if you don't mind, let me wait a little and breathe Arden. It is so sweet after the atmosphere I have been in. I am not ungrateful; pray don't think so. It was extremely kind of the Pimpernels to give me shelter in my forlorn condition——"

"I don't see why you should ever be in a forlorn condition," said Clare. "Please don't suppose I mean to be rude; but I can't bear to think of an Arden receiving hospitality from people like the Pimpernels."

"My dear cousin," said Arthur, "an Arden, when he is not actually of the reigning family, must do what he can in this world. The sanctity of the race is not perhaps acknowledged as it ought to be; and I am too much obliged to anybody who gives me shelter in this neighbourhood. One ought to be in town, I suppose; but then I am sick of town, and there is nobody to go to yet in the country. Therefore I say long live the Pimpernels. But all the same, one breathes freer here."

"There is not much to amuse any one here," said Clare.

"Amuse! I know how it will be. You will make me speak as—I ought not to speak, and then you will drive me away; and I cannot bear being driven away. There is a little pucker in the brow of the Lady Clare. May I know why?"

"You are like Edgar. He always worries me about that line in my forehead," said Clare; "as if I could help it! Yes; I have been a little annoyed to-day. I think I may as well tell you, and perhaps you can give me some advice. It is that Mrs. Murray—that Scotchwoman. She has just been here to tell me that she knew papa, and that he went to see her in Scotland two years ago. It is very strange, and very uncomfortable. He used to tell me everything—or at least so I thought."

"Nobody ever does tell everything," said Arthur, like an oracle. Clare paused, and gazed wistfully into his face.

"Not what they are thinking, nor what they feel, but surely what they do. How can you conceal what you do? Some one must be taken into your confidence. Common people must see you, in whom you have no confidence; while your very own——"

Here Clare stopped abruptly, feeling that tears were about to come into her voice.

"You don't know what you say," said Arthur, who was secretly touched. "What one thinks and feels is often the best of one. But what we do—— Was there ever a man who could venture to show a woman everything in his life—a woman like you?"

"Yes; papa," said Clare, boldly. "I am sure he told me everything—except—— Oh! is it not dreadful, is it not horrible, to have this wretched woman coming, when he is no longer here to explain it all, to make me lose my confidence in papa? And then you too!"

"I too!" he said, and he ventured to take her hand; "who am not worthy of your interest at all, and dare not lay my poor worthless life open before you. But listen, I will recant. One could not show you the past, in which one was wandering without any compass. But, Clare—— I am your cousin

—I may call you Clare sometimes?—if one could be so bold as to believe that you took any interest—I mean—Edgar, for instance, who can be sure you take an interest—I do believe that such a lucky man as he is might tell you everything. Yes; no doubt your father did; but not the past—not all the past!”

Clare drew a little aside, afraid, she could not tell why. She had withdrawn her hand from him at once. She had given him only a little bow of assent when he called her by her name. She had not *encouraged* him—of that she was certain.

“Perhaps it is best not to discuss it,” she said. “But I cannot tell you how that woman vexed me. To come and say she knew things of my own father which I did not know. Fancy, papa! Perhaps it is my pride—I should not wonder; but I could not bear it. And now, you know, if I look into his letters I may find things. Do you think it is likely? He was an old man; he was sixty when he died. He had been forty years in the world before he had any one—I mean before he had *me* to confide in. Should I read them? Should I look at them? I don’t know what to do.”

“If you could trust me,” said Arthur Arden. The thought flushed him with sudden excitement. This would indeed be delivering the very strong-

hold into his hands. And then all the remnants of honourable feeling that was left there stirred together in his mind. He blushed for the baseness he had almost meditated. "If you could trust me to look over them," he resumed, with an earnestness which surprised himself, "you may be quite sure that any and every secret—— I mean—I am nearest to you after Edgar—it would be safe with me."

And then with the speed of lightning a calculation ran through his mind. Yes, he would be faithful to his word. The secret should be safe with him, safe as in the grave. If even he should find proof of facts which would be damning to Edgar, he would consider himself bound to take no personal action upon it, if he discovered it in such a way. He would let Edgar know and Clare, who were the persons most concerned; and then he would himself withdraw, and never more mention the subject. He would leave the knowledge of it to work in their minds. He himself would win only the reward of honour and virtue. To such a course of procedure the strictest moralist could have no objection. For if anything were found out, though it would be treachery to employ it for his own interest, it could only be duty to reveal it to Edgar and Clare. He looked at his cousin with a certain anxiety, feeling that his fate lay in her hands. It lay in her hands

in a great many ways. She was but a child in comparison with his years—a baby in experience, an unreasoning, impulsive girl. And yet she held all his future in her little fingers. Its higher or lower position, even its honour or dishonour, its virtue or ill-doing—a tremendous power to lie in such unconscious hands.

“Thanks!” said Clare, with a certain haughtiness; and then in a moment Arthur felt that this at least was not to be. “No one but myself must do it,” she went on firmly; “not even Edgar, who did not love—— At least it was not possible he could love much—they were so separated. No; if there is any pain in it, I must bear it as best I can—no one must do it but me.”

He made a bow of assent to her decision. It was not for him to say a word, and even in his momentary disappointment there was a certain relief. After all, even had he adopted that path of strict virtue, there would have been something doubtful about the proceeding. Whereas, if he found anything by chance—— And then he could not but speculate what Clare would do if she made any such discovery as he hoped. What would she do? Would she, in her innocence, understand what it meant? or if it should be too clear for mistake, would her love for him who would still be her brother, for her

dead mother's son, be stronger than abstract justice? Probably she would not understand it all, he thought, and so this fine opportunity, this wonderful chance, would be thrown away. He heard her renewed invitation to him to go to the library like a man in a dream. The issues might be mighty, but it was such a chance—all depending upon how far an innocent girl could understand a record of wickedness, or an injured man have proofs of his own dishonour. "The chances are he destroyed everything," he said to himself, but half aloud, as he followed Clare.

"What did you say?"

"I was not aware I said anything. The thought that passed through my mind was that probably your father, if he had any painful secrets in his life, was so wise as to destroy all trace of them. Nay, don't mistake me. I say *if*. Probably he had no secrets at all, or only innocent ones—but *if*——"

"I don't think he destroyed anything," said Clare, almost sharply, as she led the way. Now that she had made up her mind to it, she did not wish to be balked of her mystery. It was very dreadful and painful, and a great shock; but still, if there was anything in it—— She went on first into the large, lofty, sombre room which was the Arden library. It was everything that a library ought to

be. The books were but little used, it is true ; but then the room was so noiseless, so cool, and grey, and secluded, that it seemed the very place for a student. To be sure the Ardens had never been great students, but they had all the books that ought to be in a gentleman's library—an excellent collection of English literature, a fair show of classics, and many books in other living languages. These books were very seldom disturbed behind their wires ; but the silence was supreme, and would have lent itself to the deepest study. Edgar had been daunted by the solemn dignity of the place. He had felt that his discussions with Perfitt, and all the business he had to transact, were out of place in this stately, solemn room ; and, with his usual indifference to the traditions of the Ardens, had removed himself into a homely, bright, little place, full of impertinent windows and modern papered walls, where he had hung up a great many of his possessions, and where Perfitt could talk above his breath.

After this change, a deepened and still deepening solemnity had fallen upon the library. It had been the old Squire's room, where he had spent all his mornings. The quaint, old-fashioned bureau, which stood in one corner, was full of his papers. He had locked it up himself the last day he was downstairs,

and nobody had opened it since. So completely was the room identified with him that the maids in the house began to rush past the door when twilight was coming on, and would not enter it after dark. "I know I'd see t' ou'd man a-sitting in his chair as he used to," the housemaid had said to the housekeeper; and the library was clearly in a fair way for being haunted. It was with a certain solemnity now that Clare opened the door. She had scarcely been in it since her father's death; and though she would have repudiated all superstitious feeling, no doubt there was a certain thrill of awe in her mind when she entered her father's private room, with the intention of investigating into his secrets. What if some spiritual presence might guard these relics of the ended life—what if something impalpable, undiscernible, should float between her and its records! Clare hung back a little, and paused on the threshold. She could almost fancy she saw him seated at the writing-table, not yet feeble, not asking even her sympathy, dearly though he loved her. She had known everything he did or planned; and yet, now she thought of it, how little had she known of him! Nothing except the present; his old age, with all its hushed excitements and interests past. It was (now that she thought of it) a veiled being who had sat there for so many years in her sight.

Except that he loved herself, that he dined and rode with her, and sat for hours in this library, and allowed the cottages to be rebuilt, and a great deal of charity to be given, what did she know of her father? That—and that he hated Edgar; nothing more. Her heart gave a jump to her mouth as she entered the room, in which the silence seemed to brood and deepen, knowing a great deal more than she did. Clare owned this strange influence, and it subdued her for the moment; but the next, she raised her head proudly, and shook off the momentary impression. Not now, on the threshold of the mystery, was it possible to withdraw or fail.

CHAPTER XIII.

Two or three days elapsed after this commencement of operations, and the Pimpernels had begun to be seriously affronted. Day by day Arden deserted them after luncheon without even taking the trouble to apologise. Now and then it happened that the croquet came absolutely to a stand-still, and once Mrs. Pimpernel drove into Liverpool without any captive knight to exhibit, which was very hard upon her. She was a hospitable woman, ready to invite any well-born, well-mannered individual of the (fashionable) houseless and homeless class; but then, on the other hand, she expected something in return. "Proper respect," she called it; but it meant a good deal of social work—attendance upon her daughter and herself, a sort of combination of the amateur footman and the amusing companion. At this rate she would have given Arthur Arden board and lodging for as long a period as he might desire. So long as she could have it in her power to explain to any of her friends whom she met that he was "one of the Ardens of Arden—indeed, the

next heir to the property," she was able to feel that she had something for her money. But to give him the green room, which was one of the nicest in the house, and to feed him with truffles and champagne and all the delicacies of the season, in order that he might spend half the day—the really useful part of the day—with his cousin, was a thing she had not bargained for. She showed her displeasure to the culprit himself in a manner which would have been much more plain to him had he cared more about it; and she complained to her husband, stating her grievance in the plainest terms. "That Arthur Arden is an utter nuisance," she said. "I consider it most impudent of him, Mr. Pimpernel. He comes and stays here, making a convenience of our house, but never thinks of paying proper respect, such as any man who was a gentleman would. He sees Alice and me drive out by ourselves, and actually has the assurance to wave his hand to us, and wish us a pleasant drive. Yesterday I said to him—I really could not help it—'You don't do much to make our drive pleasant, Mr. Arden,' and he simply stared at me. Fancy, having to drive into Liverpool shopping, Alice and I, without a soul!—when everybody knows I like to have a gentleman to do little things for us—and *that* Arden actually staying in the house!"

"It was cool of him," said her husband. "He is what I call a cool hand, is Arden. I'll speak to him, if you like. I am not one of the men that beat about the bush. Make yourself understood, that's my motto. There is just one thing to be said for him, however, and that is, that it may be business. He told me he was hunting through the Arden papers; confounded silly of that girl to let him; but that is no business of mine."

"Oh, business indeed!" said Mrs. Pimpernel. "Business that takes him to Clare Arden's side every afternoon! I don't much believe in that kind of business. What he can see in her I am sure I cannot divine. A stuck-up thing! looking down upon them that are as good as she is any day! Just fancy a man leaving our Alice hitting the balls about all day by herself, poor child, on the lawn!—a man staying in the house!—and going off to the Hall to Clare Arden! Do you call that proper respect? As for good taste, I don't speak of that, for it is clear he has not got any. And you take my word for it, business is nothing but a pretence."

"I am not so sure of that," said Mr Pimpernel. "You see, if he really is doing anything, it's his policy to make himself agreeable to that girl. She gives him access to the papers, you know. The

papers are the great thing. Don't you be too exacting for a day or two. If Alice mopes let me know; by Jove! I won't have my little girl crossed. It's odd if I can't buy her anything she takes a fancy to. But all the same he's an old fellow is Arden, and he hasn't a penny to bless himself with. I can't see much reason why she should set her heart on him."

"Upon my word and honour, Mr. Pimpernel!" said the lady, "if that is all the opinion you have of your own child—— Set her heart on Arthur Arden, indeed! She would never have looked at him if it hadn't been for that talk about the property. And if it turns out to be a mistake about the property, do you think I'd ever——? I hope I have more opinion of my girl than that. But when I ask a man to my house, I own I look for proper respect. I consider it's his business to make himself agreeable to me, and not to strangers. My house ain't an inn to be at the convenience of visitors to Arden. If he likes best being there, let him go and live there. I say Arden is Arden, and the Red House is the Red House, and the one don't depend upon the other, nor has nothing to do with the other. If there's one thing I hate it is pride and mean ways. Let her take him in and keep him if she wants him. But I won't keep him, and feed him with the best

of everything, and champagne like water, for Miss Clare Arden's sake, or Miss anything that ever was born !”

Mrs. Pimpernel was tying on her nightcap as she spoke, and the act deafened her a little, for the nightcap strings were stiff and well starched—which was perhaps the reason why she delivered the concluding words in so loud a voice. Mr. Pimpernel was a courageous man enough, but when it came to this he was too prudent to do anything to increase the storm.

“I'll speak to him if you like,” he said. “It's always best to know exactly what one is about. I'll put it in the plainest terms; but I think we might wait a day or two all the same. Arden's a fine property, and Arthur Arden is a clever fellow. He knows what's what as well as any man I know; and if he's making a cat's-paw of his cousin you can't blame him. If I were you I'd give him a day or two's grace.”

“I am sick of him and everything about him. He is no more use than that poker,” said Mrs. Pimpernel, seating herself in disgust in a chair which stood in her habitual corner, at the side of the vacant fireplace. The poker in question gleamed in brilliant steel incongruity from amid the papery convolutions of an ornamental structure

which filled the grate. Nothing could well be more useless : it was a simile which went to her husband's heart.

"To think that I was poking the fire with that identical poker not six weeks ago !" he said, "and now the heat's enough to kill you. If you had felt it in the office at three o'clock to-day ! I can tell you it was no joke."

"Do you think I didn't feel it ?" said his wife ; "driving into Liverpool under that broiling sun, without a soul to amuse you, or offer you his arm, or anything ; and *that* Arden quite comfortable, enjoying himself in the big cool rooms at the Hall. Ah, fathers little know what one has to go through for one's children. All this blessed afternoon was I choosing sleeves and collars and things for Alice, and summer frocks for the children. The way they grow, and the number of changes they want ! And we had to allow half-an-inch more for Alice's collars. She is certainly getting stout. I am stout myself, and of course at my age it don't matter ; but the more that child takes exercise the more she fills out. I don't understand it. You might have drawn me through a good-sized ring when I was her age "

"It must have been a very good-sized ring," said Mr. Pimpernel. "And I don't like your may-

poles of girls. I like 'em nice and round and fat——”

“Good heavens, Mr. Pimpernel, you speak as if you were going to eat them !” said his wife.

“If they were all as nice, healthy, plump, red and white as my Alice,” said the indulgent father. And then there followed a few parental comments on both sides on the comparative growths of Jane, Eliza, and Maria-Anne. Thus the conversation dropped, and the danger which threatened Arthur Arden was for the moment over. But yet he felt next morning that something explosive was in the air. It was his interest to stay at the Red House as long as possible, to have his invitation renewed, if that was possible ; and he felt instinctively that something must be done to mend matters. It was a great bore, for though he had discovered nothing as yet, he had been living in the closest intercourse with Clare, and had been making, he felt, satisfactory progress in that pursuit—indeed, he had made a great deal more progress than he himself was aware ; for the fact was that his own feelings (such as they were) were too much engaged to make him quite so clear-sighted on the subject as he might have been. A bystander would probably have seen, which Arthur Arden did not, that everything was tending towards a very speedy crisis,

and that it was perfectly apparent how that crisis would be decided. Had he himself been cool enough to note her looks—her tremulous withdrawals and sudden confidences—her mingled fear of him and dependence upon him, he would have spoken before now, and all would have been decided. But he was timid, as genuine feeling always is—afraid that after all he might be deceiving himself, and that all the evidences which he sometimes trusted in might mean nothing. Things were in this exciting state when his eyes were opened to see the cloudy countenance of Mrs. Pimpernel and the affronted looks of Alice. He was late at breakfast, as he always was—a thing which had been regarded as a very good joke when he first came to the Red House. “Papa has been gone for an hour,” Alice had been wont to say, looking at her watch; and Mrs. Pimpernel would shake her head at him. “Ah, Mr. Arden, it is just as well you have no house to keep in order,” she would say. “I can’t think whatever you do when you are married, you fashionable men.” But now the comments were of a very different character. “I am afraid the coffee is cold,” Mrs. Pimpernel said, looking hot enough herself to warm any amount of coffee. “It is so unfortunate that we cannot make our hours suit; and I must ask you to excuse me—

I must give the housekeeper her orders before it is quite the middle of the day——”

“Am I so very late—I am dreadfully sorry,” said Arthur, appealing to Alice, who sat at the end of the table looking shyly spiteful, and who remained for a moment undecided whether to follow her mother or to put on an aspect of civility and stay.

“Oh no, Mr. Arden—I mean I can’t tell—mamma thinks we see so very little of you now——”

“Do you see little of me? Ah, yes, I remember, you were in Liverpool yesterday shopping, and I found the house all desolate when I came back. You can’t think how dreary it looks when you are away. This suggestion of your father’s gives me so much work in the afternoon——”

“Oh, Mr. Arden! a suggestion of papa’s?”

“Did you not know—did you think it was by my own inclination that I was at work all day long?” said Arthur. “How much higher an opinion you must have of me than I deserve! Does Mrs. Pimpernel think it is all my doing? No, I am not so good as that. I am going over the family papers on your papa’s suggestion—trying to find out something—— Most likely I shall write a book——”

“Oh, Mr. Arden!” cried Alice Pimpernel.

"Yes; most likely I shall write a book. You can't think how many interesting stories there are in the family. Should you like me to tell you one this morning before the children are ready for their croquet? I don't know if I can do it well, but if you like——"

"Oh, Mr. Arden, I should like it so much!"

"Then, come out on the lawn," said Arthur. "I know a spot where it will be delicious this warm morning to lie on the grass and tell you about our Spanish lady. Did you ever hear of our Spanish lady? It was she who gave us our olive complexions and our black hair."

"Oh, Mr. Arden!" Alice cried, dazzled by the prospect; "only wait, please, till I fetch my work;" and she hurried away into the drawing-room, leaving him to finish his breakfast. Alice ran across her mother in the hall, as she crossed from one room to the other. Her pretty complexion was heightened, and her eyes shining with pleasure and interest. "Oh, mamma! I am going out to the lawn to hear Mr. Arden tell a story," she cried, "about the Spanish lady—a family story; and, oh! he says he does not go away for his own pleasure, but because of something papa put into his head. Fancy—papa!"

"That is all very well," said Mrs. Pimpernel.

“Your papa, indeed!—but I happen to know better. Your papa only told him, if he could find a flaw in the title—— Your papa is a great deal too liberal, Alice—offering to help people that have not a penny to bless themselves with—as if it could ever be anything to us!—or, as if there was such a thing as gratitude in the world.”

“Oh, mamma—hush!” whispered Alice, pointing to the open door of the dining-room, through which Arthur heard every word that was said; and then she added, plaintively, with ready tears gathering in her eyes, “Mayn’t I go?”

“I suppose he thinks we are all to be ready as soon as he holds up his little finger,” said the indignant mother. And then she paused, and calmed herself down. “I don’t want you to be uncivil, Alice,” she added, still much to Arthur’s edification, who heard every word. “As long as he is your father’s guest, of course you must be polite to him. Oh, yes, you can go. But mind you don’t stay too long, or expose yourself to the sun; and don’t forget that I expect my daughter to show a little proper pride.”

Poor Alice lingered for a long time in the hall before she had courage to rejoin the guest, who must have heard everything that was said. She made believe to return to the drawing-room to look

for something else which she had forgotten. And it was not till Arthur himself—who was much more amused than angry—had leisurely ended his breakfast, and strolled out into the hall, that she ventured to join him. “Oh! Mr. Arden—I am so sorry to have kept you waiting,” she cried. “Never mind. I had nothing to do but wait,” he said, smiling, and took the basket with her work out of her hand. He took her to the very shadiest seat, brought her a footstool, arranged everything for her with an air of devotion which went to the heart of Alice, and then he threw himself on the grass at her feet, and prepared to tell his tale.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. PIMPERNEL considered that she did well to be angry. It was all very well for her husband to put off and give him time ; but a man who did not show proper respect to herself and Alice was certainly not a man to be encouraged in the house. She was glad she had had the opportunity of throwing that arrow at him from the hall, and letting him see that she was not so short-sighted as other people. But, as the morning went on, she cast several glances from more than one window upon the scene on the lawn, which was a very pretty scene. Alice was seated quite in the shade, with her worsted work and her basket of wools, the wools so bright, and her dress so light and cool, against the shady green background. And on the grass at her feet lay Arthur Arden, so fine a contrast in his dark manhood to her fairness. He was a little too old, perhaps, to make the contrast perfect. But he was still very handsome, and had about him a certain air of youth such as often clings to an unmarried

vagrant. He lay looking up at Alice, telling his story ; and Alice, with her head dreamily bent over her work, sat rapt and listened. As the narrative went on, her interest became too great for her work. She dropped the many-coloured web on her knee and clasped her hands, and fixed her eyes upon the teller of the tale. " Oh, Mr. Arden ! " she exclaimed by intervals, carried away by her excitement. Mrs. Pimpernel took views of this group from all the bedrooms on that side of the house, and then she went downstairs and seated herself at the drawing-room window, and studied it at her leisure. Her thoughts changed gradually as she gazed. Arden looking up at Alice, and Alice shyly gazing down at Arden, were arguments of the most convincing character. After all, probably he had been making a sacrifice of himself. That stuck-up cousin of his could not possibly be so charming as Alice, who was open to every new interest, and made such a flattering absorbed listener. " That is what the men like," Mrs. Pimpernel said to herself. " She is not clever, poor love ; but they never like women to be clever." And then, after a long interval, she added, still within herself, " I shouldn't wonder a bit if he was frightened for the stuck-up cousin." Yes, no doubt that was it. He had to conciliate her, and pretend to be fond of her society. " After all, he is always

here all the evening," she went on, softening more and more; and the result was that at length she took down a broad hat which hung in the hall, and stepped out herself to join the garden party. "You look so comfortable, and there is evidently something so interesting going on, that I should like to have a share," she said, in a voice so softened that Arthur instantly felt his device had succeeded. "Oh, go on, please. I can always imagine what has gone before. Don't go over it again for me."

"Oh, mamma, it is so exciting," cried Alice; "it was one of the Ardens, you know, that was a sailor, and went abroad; and then he took a town out in South America; and then the Governor's daughter, the most beautiful creature in the whole place—— Oh, mamma! and that is why all the Ardens have black hair and blue eyes."

"Mr. Arden of Arden has not black hair and blue eyes," said Mrs. Pimpernel.

"No," said Arthur, very distinctly and emphatically. He did not add another syllable. The very brevity of his reply was full of significance, and told its own story. And Mrs. Pimpernel looked upon him with more and more favourable eyes.

"Do you find out all this in the papers at Arden?" she resumed. "How nice it must be. I do respect an old family. My grandmother—though

Mr. Pimpernel will never hear of it; he says he has enriched himself by his own exertions, and he is not ashamed of it, and won't have any pretensions made—just like a man's impetuosity—but my own grandmother was a Blundell, Mr. Arden. I often think I can trace a resemblance between my Alice and the Blundells. Does Miss Arden go over the papers with you, may I ask, when you are at the Hall?"

Arthur was so much taken by surprise that he was afraid he blushed; but his looks were less treacherous than he thought them to be, and it did not show. "Sometimes—No. I mean, the first day she gave the old bureau up to me," he said, faltering a little, "she showed a little interest too; but my cousin Clare—I am sorry you do not know Clare a little better, Mrs. Pimpernel. It would do her good to come under your influence. She wants a little womanly trifling and that sort of thing, you know. She is always full of such high designs and plans for everybody. She is——"

"A little tiresome sometimes and high-flown. Oh, I see exactly," Mrs. Pimpernel replied, nodding her head. Too clever for him evidently; men all *hate* clever women, she said inwardly, with a smile; while Arthur, with a savage desire to cut his own throat, or fly at hers, after his treachery to Clare,

got hold of the basket of wools and scattered them wildly about the grass. He broke the basket, and he was glad. It would have been a satisfaction to his mind if he could have trampled upon all the flower-beds, and thrown stones at the windows of the peaceful house.

"Oh, Mr. Arden, never mind," said Alice. "The basket does not matter; it was not a dear basket. Oh, please, never mind. Go on with the Spanish lady. I do want so much to hear."

"It was a Spanish lady, and she loved an Englishman," said Arthur, making an effort, and resuming his tale. He did not dislike Alice. There was no impulse upon him to fly upon her and shake her, or do anything but be very civil and gentle to the pretty inoffensive girl. In short, he was like all coarse-minded men. The young fresh creature exercised a certain influence over him by reason of her beauty; but the elder woman was simply an inferior being of his own species—a weaker man in disguise, whom he dared not treat as he would a man, and accordingly hated with a double hatred. Mrs. Pimpernel perhaps would scarcely have objected to the sentiment. She had as little refinement of the heart as he had, and was ready to use all the privileges of her sex as weapons of offence to goad and madden with them any man who was any

way obnoxious to her. "He knows he cannot take me in. I am not a simpleton to be deceived by his fair talk; and I know he hates me," she would have said, with real triumph. But in the meantime he was obliged to keep the peace. So he resumed his story. The hour of luncheon was approaching, and after that would come the welcome hour when for three or four days back he had been able to escape from all the Pimpernels. But he did not dare to make his escape that day; and while he told his romantic tale he was painfully contriving how he should manage to send word to Clare, and wondering if she would miss him! It would be a dreary business for himself, giving up the day to croquet and Pimpernels. Would Clare feel the disappointment too? Would the house be lonely to her without him? His heart gave a leap, and he felt for a moment as if he was certain it would be lonely. Curiously, this thought did not sadden but exhilarate his mind; and then he returned anxiously to the question—How could he, without exciting suspicion, have a note sent to Clare?

The ladies were so interested that they neglected the sound of the luncheon bell, and did not even perform that washing of hands which gives a man space to breathe. They did not budge, in short, until the butler came out, solemn in his black clothes, to inti-

mate that their meal awaited them; and Arthur, in dismay, had nothing for it but to offer his arm to his hostess. It was a hot day, and the luncheon was hot too. How he loathed it!—and not a moment left him to write a word, explaining how it was, to Clare!

“Positively, Mr. Arden, you have been so interesting that one forgot how the time had gone,” cried Mrs. Pimpernel. “It is an idle sort of thing amusing one’s self in the morning; but when one has such a temptation—it was quite as good as any novel, I declare!”

“Oh, mamma! Mr. Arden said he was perhaps going to write a book,” said Alice, who had grown bolder after this whole long morning which had been given up to herself.

“That would be very nice,” said Mrs. Pimpernel, with affable patronage. “Mr. Pimpernel would take half-a-dozen copies at once, I am sure. How I envy talent, Mr. Arden. It is the only thing I covet. And to find all your materials in your own family——”

“Talking of that,” said Arthur, “I must make a run up to the Rectory, after luncheon, to see Mr. Fielding. I have a—question to ask——”

At this he could see Mrs. Pimpernel’s brow cloud over at once, and the look of suspicion and

angry distrust come back to her face. Alice was better advised. She looked down on the table, and broke a piece of bread in little pieces, which answered nearly as well as a glove to button. "Oh, Mr. Arden," she said; "I thought this day you were going to stay with us. I thought we were really to have had a game at croquet to-day?"

"Oh, my dear! don't attempt to interfere with Mr. Arden's engagements," said Mrs. Pimpernel, with a forced laugh. "Gentlemen are always so much happier when they have their own way."

"And do ladies dislike their own way?" said Arthur; but he was in the toils, and could not escape. "I am looking forward to my game of croquet," he said; "and I have no engagements. I will do my business with Mr. Fielding while you are putting on your hat. It will not take me twenty minutes. He is a good old soul. He is as fond of the Ardens as if they were his own children; but not all the Ardens. I think he does not approve of me."

"Oh, Mr. Arden!—nonsense!" cried Alice, decidedly. Her mother did not say anything, but a rapid calculation ran through her mind. If the Rector did not like Arthur he could not be going to meet Clare at the Rectory; and Mr. Fielding had

been quite civil—really very civil to herself. She did not see any reason to fear him.

“If you are in a hurry for your croquet, Alice,” she said, graciously, “the only thing is to send the carriage to take Mr. Arden there and back.”

“Oh! that would be so nice!” cried Alice, with transport. But Arthur was of a very different frame of mind. “Confound the carriage,” he said within himself; but his outward speech was more civil. He had not the least occasion for it. He would so much rather not give trouble. A walk would be good for him—he should like it. At last his earnestness prevailed; and it is impossible to describe his sense of relief when he walked out into the blazing afternoon, along the dusty, shadeless road that led to the village. He had got free from them for the moment; but he could not rush to Arden in the half-hour allotted to him. He could not secure for himself a peep at Clare. He did not even feel that he could trust the Rector to deliver his note for him; and where was he to write his note? And what would Clare think? Would she despise him for his subserviency to the Pimpernels? And why should he be subservient to them? Arthur knew very well why. He would have to abandon his researches altogether, and leave to chance the furtherance of his designs upon Clare,

if he had to leave the Red House. "Everything is lawful in love and in war," he said to himself. It was both love and war he was carrying on. Love to the sister, war to the brother; and, with such a double pursuit, surely a little *finesse* was permissible to him, if to any man in the world.

But he did not reach the Rectory nor run the risk of Mr. Fielding's enmity that day. He had not gone half way up the village when he bethought himself of a much safer medium in the shape of old Sarah. Sarah's cottage was very quiet when he reached the door. Neither Mary, the clear-starcher, nor Ellen, the sempstress, were visible in it, and Sarah herself was not to be seen. He gave a glance in at the door into the little living room, which looked cool and green—all shaded with the big geranium. The place was quite silent, too; but in the corner near the stair sat a little figure, with bright hair braided, and head bent over its work. "Jeanie, by Jove!" said Arthur Arden; and he forgot Clare's note; he forgot Alice Pimpernel, who was waiting for him. He went in and sat down by her, in that safe and tempting solitude. "Are you all alone?" he said; "nobody to keep you company, and nothing but that stupid work to amuse you? I am better than that, don't you think, Jeanie? Come and talk a little to me."

"Sir!" said Jeanie, with a little start; and then she looked him steadily in the face. "I'm no feared for you now. I see you're no *that man*; but I cannot believe you when you speak. Eh, that's dreadful to say to one like you!"

"Very dreadful," said Arthur, laughing, and drawing closer to her. "So dreadful, Jeanie, that you must be very kind to me to make up for having said it. You don't believe me—not when I tell you are the loveliest little creature I ever saw, and I am very fond of you? You must believe that. I should like to take you away to a much prettier house than this, and give you all kinds of beautiful things."

Jeanie looked at him with steadfast eyes. Not a blush touched her face—not the slightest gleam of consciousness came into her quiet, steady gaze. "It's a dreadful thing to say of a man," she said; "a man should be a shelter from the storm and a covert from the tempest. It's in the Bible so; but you're no shelter to anybody, poor man. You're growing old, and yet ye never learn——"

"By Jove!" said Arthur, rising up. He had forgotten both Clare and Alice for the moment, and this little cottager was avenging them. But yet the reproof was so whimsical that it diverted him. "Do you know you are a very uncivil little girl,"

he said. "Are you not afraid to speak to me so, and you quite alone?"

"I'm no feared for you now," said Jeanie. "I was silly when I was feared. There is nothing you could do to me, even if ye wanted; and ye're no so ill a man as to want to harm me."

"Thank you for your good opinion," said Arthur; "but there are a great many things I could do. I could give you pretty dresses and a carriage, and everything you can think of; and if you were very sweet and kind to me——"

"Mr. Arden," said a voice over his shoulders, "if you have business with Jeanie, maybe it would be mair simple and straightforward if ye would settle it with me."

Arthur turned round with a mixture of rage and dismay, and found himself confronting Mr. Perfitt, who stood stern and serious in the doorway. He had need of all his readiness of mind to meet such an emergency. He paused a moment, feeling himself at bay; but he was not the man to lose his head even in so disagreeable a crisis.

"My business is not with Jeanie," he said, briskly. "My business is with old Sarah, who is not to be found; but you will do quite as well, Perfitt. I want to send a note to Miss Arden. If Jeanie will get me some paper? Do you under-

stand me, little one? Could you give me some paper to write a little letter? Poor child; do you think she understands?"

Thus he got the better of both the protector and protected. Jeanie, who had been impervious to all else, blushed crimson at this doubt of her understanding; and so did Perfitt. "She's no like an innocent or a natural. She's been well brought up and well learned," the Scotchman said, with natural and national indignation. "Indeed! I thought she was an unmistakable innocent," said Arthur; and thus it came about that Clare's note was written after all.

CHAPTER XV.

THESE days of mutual study had been very sweet to Clare. They had soothed her out of her agitation, without, however, stilling it altogether. She had acquired a new habit, and it was pleasant. While Arthur sat at the great table with the old MSS., which her father had partially arranged and prepared, she sat at the bureau, going over hosts of letters, which sometimes amused, sometimes interested her, but which were for the greater part quite unimportant—old bills and receipts and invitations, the broken fragments and relics of social life. If there had been any excitement in her mind to begin with—as it was natural there should be when she felt herself thus standing, as it were, on the edge of any secrets which her father might have had—it all died away on the first day. How innocent the life must have been of which only such harmless evidences remained! There were letters from some of his old friends—some with dead jokes in them, and dead pieces of news, embalmed and

preserved, as if they were worth preserving. Clare took a pleasure in these, because it was to her father they were addressed; and she would look up now and then, and read a few words aloud to her fellow-student, who, on his side, had many things to communicate to her out of his MSS. Sometimes Arthur was obliged to get up and bring them to her that she might help him with a difficult sentence. Sometimes it was she who had to call him. They were such near relations, their interest in the family was almost the same, and it was very natural that they should constantly refer to and consult each other. Sometimes a momentary compunction crossed Clare's mind when she thought of her brother. Would he like it? Would not he prefer to go over these papers himself, and be the first to discover his father's secrets—if there were any secrets? But he would not care for them, Clare thought to herself. He confessed openly that his interest in the Ardens was limited; whereas her own interest was without limits. If she felt sometimes a more lively compunction still at the thought that she was absolutely foiling all Edgar's precautions, and making his unwilling absence from home ridiculous by receiving thus, if not secretly, still without avowal, the visits of her cousin, her natural pride arose and put the whisper down. "Why should I give in to Edgar?"

she asked herself. "It is my life, not his, that is concerned. It is my happiness that is concerned. I took care of myself before Edgar came; and why do I need his guardianship now?"

This view of the matter made it almost a duty to balk him. Had she foreseen that Arthur was going to remain in the neighbourhood, of course she would have told her brother; but she did not know. Nobody could be more surprised than she was to find him with the Pimpernels; and it was no pleasure to her, but quite the reverse, that he should be with the Pimpernels. Besides, it might justify and strengthen Edgar in his democratic ways if he heard that his cousin, so much more true an Arden than himself, was staying at the Red House. Accordingly, she wrote to her brother less frequently than usual, and said nothing about Arthur, which was not perhaps quite what Edgar might have expected from his sister. Probably, if he heard of it, he would manage in some insidious way to get her carried off to town, which Clare detested; or he would return himself, which, in present circumstances, Clare did not desire. So she let the days run on, finding a subtle sweetness in them. There was nothing said between her kinsman and herself which all the world might not have heard—except, perhaps, by times, a tone, an inflection of voice, an almost im-

perceptible inference. Arthur was skilful in such ways of making himself secretly understood; but he said nothing to agitate or alarm her. And thus they went on with their respective pursuits, side by side. What could be more sober, more grave, less like any sentiment or romance or nonsense? But Clare *lived* in those hours, which were thus sensibly and seriously spent. All the evening she remembered, all the morning she looked for them. She had not been into the village for a week; she had not seen the Rector except at church, nor any of her old friends. She took her evening ramble through the park all alone, and happy to be alone. "It is just as it used to be," she said to herself; but Clare knew very well that it was not as it used to be. Even now a dread of the arrival of some friendly visitor, bent upon taking care of her, would sometimes overcloud her mind. If they but knew how she detested being taken care of—if they but understood how happy she could be alone!

And thus it was with her on the morning of that day which Arthur spent playing croquet and telling stories to Alice Pimpernel. She had got safely over the post and her letters. There was not one from old Miss Arden at Escott, proposing a visit, such as, from day to day, she trembled to receive; neither did Clare's old governess, Mrs. Seldon, throw herself

upon her pupil's hospitality; and though Edgar begged her again to reconsider her decision, and join him for at least a week or two "to see the pictures," there was no violence of urgency in his letter. She was safe for another day, and the sunny hours were drawing on, bringing the afternoon and its visitor. "I shall finish that first drawer to-day," Clare said to herself, with a half-conscious exaggeration of the importance of her work. She went into the library more than once to see that all was ready—that the shutters were closed to keep out the noonday sun, and the waste-paper basket cleared of all the fragments that had been thrown into it. "It is odd how pleasant such an occupation can grow," she said to herself; "I don't so much wonder at the passion for old papers that some people have." She liked to keep this thought well before her mind. Her new study was so curious and full of interest. Such a lesson, too, in life, the smallest details of which were so absorbing as long as it lasted, so sadly, amusingly insignificant now. "Some day or other some one will read my letters like that," she would add, with an incredulous smile. It was impossible, and yet no doubt it would come to pass; but would any one ever know how full and strong the blood was running in her veins—how vigorous life was, and warm and intense? Never before in

her life had she so felt the power of the present—the moment that was hers, whatever might be taken from her. The clock was about to strike, and by this time no doubt he was coming up the avenue—her fellow-student—and the pleasantest work she had ever tried was about to begin.

Clare sat down to her tapestry to occupy the moment till he should arrive—he was very exact generally, punctual to his hour. It surprised her when the little French clock chimed a quarter-past. It was strange—it gave her a little chill in the midst of her expectation—but of course it could only be accidental. Another chime, and her heart began to beat—what if he should not be coming! Clare had known little of the vicissitudes to which such intercourse as this is specially subject. Except the few days of utter loneliness which she had passed after Edgar's departure, none of the heats and chills of wooing had ever been hers. She had been mistress of the situation. It had been in her power to send him away, to discourage him, and remind him that he was utterly at her mercy; but it had never occurred to her that such power is mutual, and that she, too, was at his mercy. As she waited and listened and heard nothing, her heart began to beat high and loud. Not only or even in the first place was it mere disappointment.

A certain angry amazement and wild pride sprang up along with it. What, slight her! neglect to come when she expected him! It was an enormity which startled Clare, and shook her mind to its foundations. She could not understand nor believe it, and yet she could not believe either the suggestions of accident which she tried to make to herself. Could it be intentional neglect, discourtesy—and to her! Then there came another chime, and then the hour; he was a whole hour behind time. Clare bent her head over her tapestry as she heard a footstep approaching, and laboured as if she were labouring for her daily bread. A hot steady flush of angry excitement came to her cheek. She would not raise her head to see who it was. Had he broken his leg it might have been some excuse; but if it was he who was walking into the room, as she supposed, of course he had not broken his leg. The first thing she saw, however, was Wilkins' hand suddenly appearing before her, holding a silver tray with a letter upon it. She took it with a sense that some one had given her a blow. "Is this all?" she said mechanically. "Mr. Perfitt is waiting downstairs to see you, Miss Arden, if you will please to receive him," said Wilkins. Perfitt! what could he have to do with—— "I hope nothing has happened," said

Clare, holding, as if it were a serpent, the letter in her hand.

"I don't think so, Miss Arden; only he would like to speak a word to you if you are not too busy."

"I am much too busy," said Clare, in her anger. "I mean, let him come up in five minutes," she added, waving her hand to the alarmed servant. Then she tore open Arthur's note.

"My dear Cousin—A cursed chance (forgive the adjective, I can't help it) keeps me from Arden to-day. I have been fighting and struggling all the morning, but I cannot get off. Imagine how I hate the day and everything round me! To have to stay and be bored to death, instead of going on with the work most interesting to me in the world! Please postpone yours till to-morrow. I shall go crazy if I think you are at it without me.—In the deepest wretchedness and devotion, ever yours,

"A. A."

Clare read it twice over, and then put it from her. She stopped herself for the first moment from all expression even in her own mind. She took up her needle, and went on again furiously. Ye know, ye youths and maidens, how the air all darkened round her, how the day became odious! "Does he

think it matters to me, I wonder?" she said at length aloud, and laughed; and then threw her work down, and covered her face, and burst into violent tears. They must have been lying very near the surface, they fell so hot and so suddenly, and were over so soon. When Mr. Perfitt was ushered in five minutes later, he found Miss Arden seated with her usual dignity, a little flushed, but showing no other traces of that sudden tumult. Mr. Perfitt himself was considerably disturbed; he crushed his hat in his hand, and seated himself, when she graciously invited him to be seated, on the very edge of his chair.

"Miss Arden," he said, "I've come to make a bit complaint—tho' indeed it's no a complaint; it's rather that you might maybe speak a warning word—— You're young to meddle or trouble with such things; but you're no like other young ladies. You aye were the grand authority in old Mr. Arden's time; and so ye are with the present lad—I mean with the present Squire."

"Would you please tell me what it is? I am very busy," said Clare. "Has anything happened, Mr. Perfitt? Of course I am the only person to refer to in my brother's absence, whatever it may be."

"It's no just that anything has happened," said

Perfitt, crushing his hat, and then anxiously examining its wounds. "It's a thing I would ask nobody about, but soon settle, if it was not a gentleman connected with the house. You see it's me that brought Mr. Arthur Arden's note; but I got it like by chance, turning in as I was passing to see little Jeanie Murray. You'll see what I'm meaning now. He's a gentleman that has always behaved gentlemanly to me; but a bit lassie, Miss Arden, and no just right in her mind—no mad, I'm no meaning that—but scarce wise enough to understand it's a a' nonsense that such a gentleman says."

"Is Mr. Arthur Arden with Jeanie now?" said Clare, in her most distinct chill tones. She had been frozen suddenly where she sat—frozen to her very heart; but the shock had brought her back to perfect possession of herself.

"Na, na! trust me for that," said Perfitt, with a laugh. "Before I left the house I saw my lord off the premises—ye may trust me for that. And there's nae harm done, Miss Arden. I do not for a moment suppose there's any harm. But Mr. Arthur was aye a thought wild, saving your presence——"

"I will take care," said Clare, steadily, "that it does not occur again." Her voice was frozen too. In the shadowy warmth of the room, in the heat of

the summer afternoon, it went like a touch of ice through Perfitt's bones. How will she manage that, I would like to know? he said to himself, but was so chilled that he only gasped audibly, and had no other answer to make.

"I will take care it does not occur again," said Clare. "You were quite right to tell me. If there is anything else you want to say, pray go on."

"Nothing else—nothing else, Miss Arden," said Perfitt, stumbling to his feet; and then he stood awkwardly clasping his hat for a minute more. "And I have no fear on my mind that any harm's been done," he added. "There's no harm done, Miss Arden. I wouldna give you a wrong idea. But only Mr. Arthur——"

"I have told you," repeated Clare, still more and more coldly, "that it shall not occur again."

CHAPTER XVI.

PERFITT went away from Arden, as, indeed, he had gone to the house, in a very perplexed and uncomfortable state of mind. "I have great doubts in my mind if I should have spoken," he said to himself as he went away; and then all at once there flashed upon him a report he had once heard which connected Arthur Arden's name with that of Clare. When he recalled this, he slapped himself upon the thigh with supreme self-contempt. "My man, you've gone and put your foot in it now," he thought; "could you no have taken care of your ain flesh and blood yourself, without bothering that poor lassie? Dash ye! and dash him, the ne'er-do-weel!" This was how Mr. Perfitt contemplated his own conduct as he went away; but it was a very different kind of self-discussion that he left behind.

Clare was absolutely stunned by the blow which had just fallen upon her. Had she taken time to think, no doubt she would have seen that she was

unjust—but she did not take any time to think. It was the first great slight she had ever received in her life—a slight greater than any other kind of disrespect that could be shown to a woman. A man who had been devoting himself to her, who had caught at every opportunity for showing his devotion since the moment he reappeared at Arden—that he should venture to go and excuse himself to her on the ground of inevitable engagements, and then be discovered hanging about a village girl, recommending himself so potently that her friends interfered! Oh, how glad she was, how grateful to Perfitt for bringing that complaint to her! She might never have known; she might have believed that he was worthy, and that he loved her, but for that revelation. She was grateful to Perfitt, and yet how she hated him! But for him she might still have been partially happy. She would have received the excuse, and to-morrow all might have been well; that was to say, she would have allowed herself to be deceived, which, of all fates, was surely the meanest and most humiliating. And then to think how much good she had intended to her cousin! In this moment of bitter humiliation Clare ceased to trifle with herself. She tore off the veil which she had wrapt so willingly over her eyes, and admitted to herself that she had meant to bestow

everything upon her kinsman. She had even gone the length of being quite content to despoil her brother for his sake. She had made up her mind that Old Arden should be his, and that if she could not make him the head of the family she would at least secure to him its oldest possessions. All this she admitted to herself in the tumult of rage and shame which filled her mind. She was ready to do all this, and he—— He could not sacrifice to her a passing fancy for the pretty face of a girl; for there could be nothing more than that in it. And where was the mother who should have taken charge of the girl? Clare tried hard to persuade herself that it was Jeanie's fault, or that the grandmother had some artful design upon Arthur. She tried very hard to believe that she believed this, but it was a difficult attempt. The thought came back to her with renewed bitterness that it was he—he only—who was in fault, he to whom she would have given everything! Then her mind took a sudden leap, as the mind will sometimes do at its own will and pleasure, and pictured to her what might have happened had she actually done what she had been willing to do. The future, which had been so likely an hour ago, which was so impossible now, opened up upon her with a great flash and glow. She saw herself his wife, dependent upon him for all her

happiness, pledged to him for ever and ever; his honour hers, his credit hers; the burden of any scandal, of any shame that might come upon him, to be borne by her equally; and it seemed to her as if she were gazing into a mirror, in which she saw herself seated alone and neglected in the house which she had bestowed upon him, while he himself roamed about the world, finding at every turn some facile love—some Jeanie, she said to herself—and yet was so just that she paused and blushed, knowing she did an innocent creature wrong.

This extraordinary revulsion of feeling shook Clare to the very depths of her being. She had been floating so smoothly down the stream that she was not aware how very fast she had been going; and now this sudden and terrible obstacle seized her and maddened her, and enveloped her in a whirlwind of wild thoughts, as a sudden Niagara might seize and rend a pleasure-boat. She had been prepared for some dangers. He might have got “involved,” as people say, with Alice Pimpernel, and been compelled by honour to marry her for her money’s sake. Such a catastrophe, Clare thought, she could have borne. And he might have been a treacherous enemy to her brother; for that she had been afraid, and had prepared herself. But for this she was unprepared. False to her, false to his own

interests, wooing ruin instead of prosperity, giving up his reputation and his life, as well as slighting the true love she had waiting for him. Oh, how miserable, how mean, how wretched it was! Was it possible that he could hold life so cheap as to spend it thus? And he not a boy—no longer a boy who might be tempted and led astray. She made an effort to calm the wild misery in her own breast, by forgetting herself, and making believe that pity for him was the only sentiment that moved her. He was a fool, he was mad, she said to herself; and then the something that burned within her, the terrible pain that gnawed and gnawed at her heart, came uppermost. It was the first slight she had ever received—and such a slight! The Princess had found that a beggar might be preferred to her. The proud, upright, spotless Clare had discovered an attempt to deceive her. The thought made her writhe, as any poor living creature might writhe against the spear that pinned it to the earth. Oh, if she could but escape it, forget, throw Arthur Arden out of her thoughts! But that was impossible. She had to bear it, and get the better of it if she could.

And underneath there existed a still deeper feeling, at which Clare almost trembled. She would be avenged on him one way or other. She would

punish him for his inconstancy and, for what was worse, his deception. This incident should not, could not, must not pass over as if it had happened to any common milk-and-water girl. The intensity of her passion dismayed even herself. She would bear it, so that no man should ever have it in his power to say he had broken Clare Arden's heart; and she would not bear it, so that no man should dare believe it was possible to slight her or treat her as a nobody. She took up his letter, crushing it as if it were a real enemy, and her eye caught the entreaty that she would postpone her work, as he was obliged to postpone his. It was a satisfaction to her to be able to contradict him practically and at once. She tore his letter up into little pieces, and then she went with a rapid step to the library. To do instantly and energetically what he had begged her not to do, was in its way a consolation to Clare.

She had but just entered the library when a timid knock came to the door. It was repeated again, even after she had said languidly, "Come in——" "Come in," she repeated, with that impatient irritability which is natural to a disturbed and excited mind. Then, after a little pause, the head of Mrs. Fillpot, the housekeeper, appeared timidly at the half-opened door. "May I speak a

word with you, Miss Clare?" said Mrs. Fillpot in a tone of fright. "Come in!" repeated Clare, this time imperiously. The housekeeper at Arden was an old servant. She had been supreme in the house ever since Clare was born. And though Miss Arden's decided character had quietly shorn her of all transferable authority, yet Clare herself had sufficient sense of the woman's value to be respectful of Mrs. Fillpot's opinions. The housekeeper had not given in without a struggle, and she had a great awe of Clare: but at the same time she was conscientious, and had an opinion of her own; so that there was now and then a little skirmishing between the two, always ending in a victory for Clare, but yet never without a certain effect upon her. Mrs. Fillpot came in with the air of a woman who had made up her mind to something desperate. She gave a frightened glance round the room, and then approached her young mistress. "I beg your pardon, Miss Clare," she said, "for disturbing you; but I thought Mr. Arthur Arden was here——"

"Mr. Arthur Arden is not here, you perceive," said Clare, feeling as if his name choked her; "and I should be very glad to know what you want at once, for I am busy. It can wait till to-morrow if it is anything about the house."

"It is nothing about the house," said Mrs. Fillpot, breathing hard with alarm and excitement; and then she made another pause, which drove Clare wild with impatience.

"For heaven's sake say what it is," she cried, "and leave me; don't you see I have something to do?"

"Miss Clare," said Mrs. Fillpot, solemnly, "I've been about you since you were a baby. When your poor dear mamma died, though it was Sarah as took you from the month, I had all the responsibility. When you was a little girl with governesses and that sort, it was always me as was referred to——"

"Please to tell me what all this is about," said Clare, coldly. "You see I am engaged; I have a great many things to think of. I don't want to go over all my childish days now——"

"Miss Clare, it's not my wish to make myself disagreeable—it never was," said Mrs. Fillpot, growing breathless, "but when I see things going on as are not what they should be, and gentlemen's visits which it's not nice for a young lady to be known as one that would put up with them, and going on day after day, and the Squire not here, nor no lady companion, nor even a servant a-setting in the room——"

"What do you mean?" said Clare sharply, stopping her in the midst of this harangue.

"I mean just what I am saying, Miss," said Mrs. Fillpot, in her excitement; "it's not nice for no young lady—it's a thing as no young lady should do, Miss. I've held my tongue as long as I could, and I won't no longer. I'll write to Master, Miss—I'll speak to Mr. Arthur—I must do something. Not so much as a maid a-setting in the room and ne'er a lady in the house—and him coming and coming. I will say of Mr. Arthur as I thought he had more sense."

Clare had chilled and hardened into stone as she was thus addressed. A deep blush had covered her face at first, but that had faded, leaving her more pale than usual; and her blue eyes shot glances that were like arrows of ice into the good woman's heart. Those blue eyes, which were sometimes so sweet, how cold, how blighting, how withering they could be! She pointed her hand to the door before she could speak. She made a spasmodic effort to retain her composure and dignity. "Do precisely what you please," she said, "but do not let me see you again."

"Miss Clare!" said the woman. "Oh, Miss Clare, it's your good I am thinking of. What could I want but your good?—me that has nursed you, and loved you, and took an interest——"

"Go away, please," said Clare, with a choked voice. "Go away; I don't wish to see you again."

"Oh, Miss Clare!——"

"Go. Don't you see I am——occupied? Can't you see? Good heavens! are you a woman, and have no more sense than to stand and drive me frantic there?"

"But Miss Clare——"

"I have no more to say to you. Go, please," said Clare, falling back into her seat. She leaned her head against the old bureau, which had been her father's. He had sat there a thousand times bending over it as she was doing now. Would he have been any aid to her in this terrible emergency! Shame, too, as well as everything else! She had been no better than Jeanie—less maidenly than Alice Pimpernel. She had cared too much for him to remember the maidenly decorums in which she had been brought up. She had laid herself open to the comments of this woman, and probably of every servant in the house. No doubt they had found her out, and laughed to see how she, too, indulged herself when her own feelings were touched, indifferent to all proprieties—she who had made so many indignant remonstrances on that very subject, and so often bidden the village girls to have a due respect for themselves. She sat with her face

turned away, pretending to search among the drawers of the bureau, while Mrs. Fillpot stood explaining and protesting behind. Clare did not even know when the housekeeper retired, weeping and wondering. She sat absorbed in her own misery, drawing to herself such pictures of her own conduct as the most guilty could scarcely have exceeded. She did not know how long she sat opening and shutting mechanically the drawers of the bureau, idly examining, without seeing what she was doing, its inner corners. Half in abstraction, half in determination to prove to herself that she was pursuing the researches which Arthur had begged her not to pursue, she had opened a little door which was locked, and which shut in a nest of smaller drawers which had not as yet been examined. It was these she was now playing with unconsciously, not thinking or seeing what she did. One of them, however, was very stiff, and the little material obstacle roused her up almost against her will. She pulled at it in her confusion of mind, rowing angry over the difficulty. Was everything to resist her, even such a thing as this? Then she perceived there was a bundle of papers within which kept it from opening. Clare woke up, and took pains when she felt herself, as it were, held at bay. She took a great deal of trouble over it, and

at last succeeded in opening the drawer. That was all she wanted—her interest failed as soon as the bundle fell out. It was a packet of letters enclosed in a piece of paper sealed at the ends and endorsed. She had found twenty such already, all of the most ordinary description—"Poor Howard's letters," "Applications for leases," "Papers about the woods." This was the sort of endorsing she had generally found. The new packet, doubtless, was no more important than the others. She took it into her hand and threw it down again into the open pigeon-hole which was nearest to her. And then only for the first time she perceived that it was growing dark, and that the day was almost over. The shutters had never been opened which she had closed in the morning to keep out the sun. To keep out the sun! would the sunshine ever come in again? She locked up the bureau slowly, and went wandering out, not knowing where she went. Sunshine and light had departed from Arden. Was it for evermore?

CHAPTER XVII.

CLARE'S condemnation of her cousin was, of course, unjust. He had not done anything to deserve so harsh a judgment. At least, what he had really done to deserve it was unknown to her. He had not attempted to deceive her in that special point. His note was true to the letter : the fault he had committed was but of two minutes' duration, and was simply the result of a sudden temptation, which probably he would have avoided had he been at all prepared for it—avoided, be it understood, not out of any distaste for the pleasant folly, but for prudential motives. But he had not been prepared for it ; and he had seen a pretty, defenceless creature in his way, poor enough and of sufficiently small consideration to have violent pseudo-love made to her, and an attempt at least at familiarity ; and he had not been able to resist the opportunity. Arthur Arden would not have ventured to address Jeanie so had she been even Perfitt's daughter. He was not cowardly in the ordinary sense of the word ; but there was so

much of the craven in him, as in most men moved by similar impulses, that his passions were only irrestrainable when the object of them could be safely assailed. Even with all this, and allowing that could he have done it he would have tried his best to make a victim of Jeanie, still there had not been time enough, nor opportunity enough, to raise any such purpose seriously in his mind. When he spoke to her, he only half meant, or perhaps did not mean at all, what he said. It was mere levity and spontaneous, instinctive, not intentional, wickedness. How far this would have mended matters with a really just critic I will not pretend to ask ; but it would have mended matters with Clare. She, however, had formed a very different opinion of the whole transaction. It was most serious, and full of elaborate plan and purpose in her eyes—the basest purpose of which man could be guilty, and the most mortifying to herself. She made the fact which Perfitt had disclosed to her into a whole drama of evil intention. She did not know in what self-denial her kinsman had spent the morning, in what self-sacrifice he was about to spend the afternoon. She did not know how much he was suffering in order chiefly to prolong his stay in her neighbourhood. It is true that his other sins richly deserved the condemnation she had pronounced. He was employ-

ing her as a shield, while he attempted to do the greatest possible injury to her brother. He was plotting secretly under her protection and in her very shadow against the honour and good fame of the family, and even against herself personally; for her own fortune was involved in Edgar's, so far, at least, as Old Arden was concerned. For all this she could have better pardoned him than for the supposed deception he had just practised upon her. Thus his doom was just, but it was not given on just grounds.

But it happens often enough, as many women could testify, that the doom pronounced by virtue upon vice, by the true upon the false, bears very often much more heavily upon the judge than upon the condemned. The culprit bears up under the blow, while she who sits on the throne of Justice is shaken to pieces by the reverberation. Clare, who felt herself both judge and executioner in one, and whose mind was full of wild plans of vengeance, was herself at the same time the immediate victim. Drearily, more dreary than ever before, the day closed upon her, leaving her all alone in the solitude of those stately rooms, dimly lighted and all so silent. Night was coming—night which, if it brought forgetfulness, would be her best comforter; but it seemed utterly impossible that it could bring

forgetfulness, or that sleep should ever come again to her burning, weary, yet wakeful eyelids. She could not read, she could not work; she could think but of one subject, and that was not one which she could exercise any free will about, discussing it reasonably with herself; but one which pursued her, forcing itself into supremacy, driving her thoughts wildly into one channel, whether she would or not. She sat by the table, with her head supported in her two hands, and gazed into the white flame of the lamp till her eyes were almost scorched, while a thousand wild fancies pursued each other through her mind. The moths circled about and about the light, and so did her thoughts about the fatal centre which they had formed for themselves; until the flimsy suicides wove themselves in with her imaginations, and became somehow a part of her and them. She had not energy enough left to save them. "There is another," she would say to herself; "are they all mad, I wonder? Can't they feel that it kills them? I wonder where he is now. Oh, I hope he is beginning to feel what a false step he has taken! There is many a woman that will put up with being deceived, but not me—never me. To think he should have known me so little, and he an Arden! I wonder what Edgar will say when he knows: he shall never know. I

hate him, but I will never, never betray to any one—— And yet I promised I would interfere. I said it should never occur again. There is another, and another. I wonder why they like it so much. It can't be for the warmth, for it is warm everywhere to-night. I said it should never occur again—— I was a fool to take any part; what have I to do with—with—that girl? She is not even a village girl, to have a claim upon me. If she likes to be ruined and shamed, that is not my affair. Perhaps she thinks he—loves her, forsooth! Oh, what fools, what fools people are—people and moths! The lamp is choked up with them; what strange, strange, silly creatures! I can't stop them; and how can I stop her? And why should I!—it is her business, it is not mine. If she had been a girl in the village—— But then I said it should not occur again.”

Thus Clare mused: and as the slow moments went on, her musing grew into a kind of rhythm of broken fancies, all bound together by the continued burden—“I said it should not occur again.” It was like a song which she thus murmured to herself, or rather which murmured in her ears without any will of hers, rising and falling, with its refrain—“I said it should not occur again.” At length the refrain gained upon the rest, and repeated

and repeated itself till her brain grew dizzy. At all events she had to keep her word—and what should she do? Should she interpose authoritatively, as was her right as the natural protectress of every girl in Arden? Should she write to him herself, and warn him that his evil designs were known, and she, the champion and shield of her maidens, in arms against him? Should she act imperiously and with a high hand, by sending Jeanie and her grandmother out of her territory? She was so used to think as well as act *en princesse* that neither of those plans seemed quite impracticable to Clare. They were, on the contrary, quite natural, things which had she been less concerned she would not have hesitated to do. But, alas, she was intimately concerned, and her arm seemed paralysed. She gave forth the sentence without hesitation, but as for the manner of executing it, she seemed only capable of thrusting the sword into herself.

Then a sudden thought struck her. As it came to her all at once, so she executed it all at once, with the impatient and irritable haste of suffering. Half the mad things that people do when they are in trouble are done in this way. Their brain grows dizzy over deep-laid plans and long-nursed impossible conceptions, and then a sudden suggestion

comes across them and they obey it on the moment. She started up and brought her blotting-book from the writing-desk where it was, to the ring of light round the lamp. And she wrote the following note hastily, without even pausing to draw breath :—

“DEAR MR. FIELDING,—I have just heard, to my great pain, that your little friend Jeanie has been annoyed by my cousin Arthur Arden. There are difficulties in the way of my direct interference which I need not explain. One ought to be above all secondary motives, but unfortunately one is not. I do not know who is most to blame, if she has been trying to attract him, thinking, perhaps, he was less experienced in such matters than he is, or if it is entirely his fault. He is staying at the Red House with the Pimpernels, which of itself, of course, is a reason why I do not desire to have more intercourse with him than I can help ; and, of course, this affair is a double reason. I do not advise you to communicate with him, for gentlemen, I believe, do not like to be called to account for their actions ; but I think you should do something at once in respect to the girl. You might put her on her guard, that he is not at all the sort of man to be made a victim of, or taken in in any way. He must either be simply amusing himself, or his

object cannot be a good one. I speak freely, because you know I have always felt that in my position false delicacy would be a crime. I have always considered myself responsible for the girls in the village, and my motive is, I think, quite enough to justify me. I think if I were in your place—not being able to act in my own—that I should have the girl removed at once from Arden. There seems no reason why she and her grandmother should have chosen this place to live in. And there is nothing particular that ever I heard of in Arden air. Any other fresh country air would, no doubt, do quite as well.

“I should be glad if you would let me know what you do, and as soon as possible. Edgar being away makes one feel it all the more.

“Yours affectionately,

“CLARE ARDEN.”

Poor Clare ! she wrote this at a stretch, scarcely lifting her head from the paper, with a philosophy which surprised herself, and which was not in the least philosophy, but only the very highest strain of excitement. But she could not help hanging up that one little flag of distress at the end—“Edgar being away makes one feel it all the more.” She had not said a word about feeling it till then ; but

now her head fell upon her clasped hands, and she wept a few very bitter, very scalding tears, hiding them even from herself, so to speak, in the handkerchief which she crushed against her hot, scorched eyes. And then she rose up and put her note in an envelope, and sent it off—for it was only about nine o'clock still, though it felt to Clare as if it must have been the middle of the night.

Immediately after she went upstairs, and went to bed, to the great amazement of her maid, for Clare did not usually keep early hours. She wanted the darkness, the stillness, the quiet, she said to herself; but the fact was, she wanted a change—anything that would be different from what she had been before doing. She could not sleep, of course; and when she had borne that as long as it was possible to bear it, she got up and partially dressed herself, and went down in her dressing-gown to the library, to see if some novelty or distraction could be found there. By this time the whole house was asleep—dark, motionless, and silent, like a house of the dead. Her candle was ghostly beyond description in the great, dim library. It even occurred to Clare's mind, as a kind of hope, that she might see something unearthly, and thus be driven legitimately mad, and a reason given to herself and others for the change in her, which no

doubt others would see. But nothing unearthly was to be seen—nothing but a vast expanse of darkness—her father's chair standing by the table—the walls clothed with books, glimmering faintly in the corner nearest the light, from out the tarnished brass of the lattice-work which enclosed them. Nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing but herself—the one thing of which no change could rid her. Clare sat down at the bureau in her misery, and opened it with the key which she had left in it. The little inner door which she had unlocked in the morning, and which now it suddenly occurred to her she had never seen unlocked before, swung in her face as she opened the outer enclosure. In mere sickness of heart she thrust her hand into the corner where that afternoon she had thrown the bundle of letters which had prevented one of the drawers from opening. Indifferently she had thrown it down; indifferently she took it up. One end of it was singed and brown, as if it had been thrown into the fire, and the outside corner was slightly torn, with a black mark on it of something by which it had evidently been fished out again. Somebody's letters which her father had almost made up his mind to burn, and then had repented. This did her a little good. A languid interest—too languid almost to be called interest

—came into her mind—a faint wonder breathed across her why he who burned nothing should have thought of burning that. She turned it over indifferently to read the endorsing. And even after she had read it, it was some time before the words produced any effect upon Clare's mind. "Papers concerning the boy." Papers concerning the boy! Who is the boy? What does it mean? she said to herself. Then she came, as it were, to life, as she gazed at it. Through the broken envelope two or three words caught her eye. She raised herself quite upright, seized it tremulously, and put her hand upon the seals. But even while she did so her mind changed. Instead of breaking open the packet, she snatched up another piece of paper, and hastily re-covered it, then taking her handkerchief, which was the first thing she could find, tied it round the parcel. Then she sat for half the night stupefied, with a new subject for her thoughts.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CLARE'S proceedings next day were the cause of absolute consternation to everybody concerned. In the morning she was very restless, roaming about from floor to floor—from the library to the dining room, and then to her bed-chamber, carrying with her something tied up in her handkerchief. "Can I carry it for you, Miss Arden?" her maid had asked, meeting her suddenly on the stair. "Carry it! what?" Clare had answered, sharply, dropping her hand, with the little bundle in it, among the folds of her dress. Had it been perceived how often she changed the place in which she had this parcel locked up the wonder of the household would have been still further roused. She had sat up half the night at least doing nothing, staring into the candle; and when finally she went up stairs, she had carried her mysterious bundle with her, placing it under her pillow. When she came down, weary and pale, in the morning, she had carried it to the library, and locked it into the bureau. Then, prompted by

some sudden change of mind, she had transferred it from the bureau to a drawer in the writing table in the morning room, where she chiefly sat; then she carried it off to her wardrobe; and, finally, about noon, restored it to its original place in the bureau. She put it back into its own original drawer, which would scarcely contain it—locked the inner door, and hung the key round her neck on a ribbon; and then locking the outer part of the bureau, shut up the key of that in her desk. She was very pale, and yet now and then would grow hot and flushed without any reason. She employed herself all the morning in feverish movement from one place to another. At twelve she called her maid Barbara and told her to make ready to go out. "I am going up to the Three Beeches," she said; "take something with you to eat, for it may be late before we get home again." "Shall I take any luncheon for you, Miss Arden?" said the girl, "and shall I order the carriage?" "I don't want anything to eat, and I prefer to walk," Clare said abruptly; and, accordingly, at twelve o'clock of a blazing summer morning, she set out for a three miles' walk, attended by her unwilling maid with a parcel of books. "If any one calls you can say I have gone out for the day," she said to Wilkins, who was no less amazed. She had not gone a hundred yards from the house when

Barbara interrupted her progress. "Please, Miss Arden, I see the Rector coming up the avenue." "Never mind," said Clare, with an impatient gesture, and hurried on.

The Rector had come up in a state of great trouble and excitement—first, to remonstrate with Clare for her injurious suspicions in regard to poor little Jeanie; secondly, to warn herself against Arthur Arden; and, thirdly, to ask her advice what he should say to Mrs. Murray on the subject, which was a part of the business which frightened him much. He was not an early man at any time, and Clare's note had much discomposed him, and the parish business had taken him up for at least an hour. When he was turned back from the door of Arden his astonishment knew no bounds. "Gone out!" he said, "gone out for the day! What is the meaning of that, Wilkins? Has she gone to pay a visit! But I did not meet her in the avenue, and she has not passed through the village this morning, so far as I could hear."

"No, sir; she has not gone upon a visit," said Wilkins; "she's about somewhere in the park, I do believe. Not as I knows that o' my own knowledge," he added, hurriedly. "Miss Clare may have gone—bless you, she might have gone anywhere—to Lady Augusta's, maybe, only they're all away, or

to Miss Somers's, or to the village. Miss Clare is the independentest young lady, as you know——”

“Yes, yes, she may be independent, but she does not rush out like this without any reason. Has she had any letters about business—anything to call her abroad——”

“I don't know, sir, no more than Adam,” said Wilkins, shaking his head; and then he sank into mystery. “If you'll step in for a moment, sir, I'll call Mrs. Fillpot. I think she'd like to say a word; and she has a kind of a notion she knows why.”

Mr. Fielding went into the hall, shaking his head, and then he passed into Clare's morning room, where everything was painfully tidy, and there was no appearance of any occupation about. The Rector shook his head still as he peered into the corners with his short-sighted eyes. “She has taken it to heart; she has taken it to heart!” he said to himself, and shook his head more and more.

Then Mrs. Fillpot came in, with a white apron, the corner of which she held in one hand, ready for instant action. Wilkins lingered near the door, with the view of being one of the party, but the Rector promptly closed it upon him. “You have something to tell me from Miss Clare?” he said; for to be sure he was jealous of being thought to come and ask questions of the servants at the Hall.

"Nothing from Miss Clare, sir; worse luck," said Mrs. Fillpot; "but I come to tell you what's to do with her this morning. Mr. Arthur, sir, has been a-coming day after day. He's been here, has Mr. Arthur, since last Monday, every afternoon of his life; and Miss Clare and he a-sitting in the library, as none of us likes to go in no more nor we can help, a-working with their papers. It's hurt me to see it, Mr. Fielding, like as if she had been my own child. A young lady and no mother, and the Squire away as should take care of his sister. So I up and told her yesterday. It took a deal of screwing up to give me the courage; but bless you, sir, if a woman hasn't that courage for one as she's brought up—— So I up and told her. I said—'It ain't right, Miss, and it ain't nice, nor what your poor dear mamma, if she'd have lived, would have approved.' I said it plain out as I'm saying it to you, though I was all of a tremble. Bless you, thinking of it, I'm all of a tremble now."

"And what did she say?" asked Mr. Fielding.

"She didn't say much, sir. Miss Clare was never one to say much. She waved me to go, and I went, without even a 'Thank you, Mrs. Fillpot,' or 'I know you means well,' nor nothing. But when Barbara came to me this morning asking for a bit of lunch, and saying as her young lady was

a-going out to spend the day, bless you, I saw it all in a moment. She didn't say nothing, but she's acted upon it, has Miss Clare."

"And did nothing else happen besides what you tell me?" said Mr. Fielding, still shaking his head.

"Nothing as I can think on. Well, Mr. Arthur he didn't come yesterday, and Mr. Perfitt he brought a bit of a letter, and he went in and saw her for five minutes or so, did Perfitt; but that's all."

"Oh, Perfitt saw her, did he?" said the Rector.

"Yes, sir. But I don't see what difference that could make," said Mrs. Fillpot, jealous of her power.

"No, no, I don't suppose so," said Mr. Fielding; but in his mind he allowed that it might make a great deal of difference, and went away very thoughtfully, shaking his head. "She has taken it to heart, poor child; she has taken it to heart," he said to himself as he went home, shaking his head with that mingled pity and sense of superiority which an affectionate bystander feels in such a case. Better that she should suffer a little now than afterwards, when it would be too late, was Mr. Fielding's thought, and in his aged mind this "suffer a little" was all that was comprehensible of Clare's passion and agony. She would get over it after a while, of course, and no particular harm would be

done. Such was his conception of the state of affairs.

There was, however, another visitor to Arden, whose consternation was still greater. Arthur came at his usual hour in the afternoon, with all his energies refreshed by his temporary absence, and with a determination in his mind to know his fate at once, so far as Clare was concerned. He loved her, he said to himself. It was true that he was quite capable of being momentarily drawn aside from his allegiance, and that his recent pursuit of her had been complicated by other motives. But yet he loved her. If Edgar were unmasked to-morrow, and himself in Edgar's place, it would still be his cousin Clare whom he would prefer to all others to sit upon his throne with him. And why should he delay speaking to her on the subject? If things remained as they were—which was probable—then she would share what she had with him; and if he could make any discovery and better his own position, why then of course he would share everything with her.

“If you are not the heiress born,
And I, he said, the lawful heir,
We two will wed to-morrow morn,
And you shall still be Lady Clare.”

This rhyme ran in his head as he went up the

avenue, with many a softer thought. He had made himself very agreeable to Alice Pimpernel the day before—so much so as to leave little doubt on her mother's mind as to what would follow "if anything came of that Arden business;" and he had shown an inclination to make himself more than agreeable to Jeanie. But neither of them so much as touched his determination, if it were possible, to wed Clare Arden, whatever might happen. Accordingly, he went with his mind made up to see her, and open his heart. And there was so much natural feeling in the matter that he was more excited by it than he had been for years. Really it was something which he could with justice call his happiness which was involved. It would make the most material difference to him if she refused him. He felt that he might return to the Red House an altered man—either happy and serene, or discouraged beyond all conception. He feared a little, because he was in earnest; but he hoped a great deal more than he feared. These days of uninterrupted intercourse had been much in his favour, he felt. He had done everything he could to gain his cousin's confidence; he had refrained from love-making in any of its distincter fashions. He had shown himself anxious for her approval, conscious of the improprieties of his past life. In

short, he knew he had made progress; and now with a thrill of excitement he came to seek his fate.

“Out!” he said blankly, stricken dumb with amazement, and gazing at Wilkins as if he had been a prodigy; and then he recovered himself. “Ah! out in the garden, I suppose,” he added. “Be so good as to let Miss Arden know that I am here, and ask if I may join her.”

“She is not in the garden,” said Wilkins, with a solemn enjoyment of the other’s disappointment. Arthur Arden was not liked by the servants; and Wilkins lingered over every word by way of tantalising him more. “Miss Arden has gone out, sir, for the day. For the day—they were her very words. ‘Wilkins,’ she says, ‘if any one calls, I have gone out for the day.’ Nothing, sir, could be more exact than Miss Arden was.”

Arthur was so completely taken aback that he stood aghast for a moment gazing at the man who confronted him with the ghost of a smile on his face, blocking up the door. Wilkins stood like one who felt his own supremacy, in an easy attitude upon the threshold, forbidding all comers as effectually as if he had been a squadron of cavalry. “Them were the very words,” he said, rubbing his hands; and Arthur stood below, expelled as it were from Paradise. The catastrophe was so sudden and

so unlooked for that he did not in the least know how to meet it. He could not even for the moment hide his own discomfiture and dismay.

"I suppose Miss Arden intends me to go on with my work and await her coming," he said at length. "I am very sorry to miss her, but I suppose that is what I must do."

"She didn't say nothing about it, sir," said Wilkins; "and what is more, she's been and locked the library door."

Then Arthur perceived that things were really going against him. He would not betray himself to the servant's all-penetrating eyes. "Ah, I suppose something must have happened," he said, with as light a tone as he could summon up. "Tell Miss Arden I was very sorry to find her gone. I suppose she has changed her mind about the papers. Tell her if she wishes me to go on with them that she must send me word to the Red House. I shall be there for some days longer. I shall pay my respects to her whether I hear from her or not before I leave; but if I am to do any more work ask her to let me know."

"I'll give her your message, sir," said Wilkins, with ill-concealed satisfaction; and then, before he was conscious what it meant, before he could half realise the position, Arthur found himself with his

back to the house, making his way once more down the avenue. Could it be possible? Was he dreaming? He was so completely taken by surprise that he had lost all his readiness of reason and promptitude in an emergency. Nothing so overwhelming, so sudden, so mysterious, had ever happened to him before. It was not only a disappointment, it was an insult. Dismissed by a servant; turned away from the door which, it might be, was legally his; sent off without a word of explanation! Arthur paused when he had gone half-way down the avenue to say to himself that he must be dreaming, that he must go back and laugh at the hoax that had been played upon him, and find Clare, in the full satisfaction of a successful trick, laughing too. But then there came in the chill thought that Clare was not at all the sort of person to perform a trick of any kind, and that what she did was generally in deadly earnest, relieved by no practical jokes. His amazement was so profound that he scarcely said a word to himself all the way down. Had she found out anything? Was there anything to find out? His meaning in that raid upon the papers was known to no one but himself. Nobody could say a word against his motives; nobody could be offended with him because he had a zeal for his family. To write a book about them even was a perfectly justifiable,

not to say laudable, idea. What could she have had to find fault with? Arthur was as much surprised as dismayed. He went home feeling as if he had been beaten corporeally as well as mentally—feeling more absolutely small, and mean, and contemptible than he had ever done in his life—humiliated before Wilkins, even—made the laughing-stock of the servants. This was the manner in which he was sent away from Arden on the day which he had selected to decide his fate.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT is comparatively easy to make a sudden and rapid decision which is (one says to one's self) final, and settles in a moment some great question which affects a whole existence. As soon as the uncertainty is over, and the decision absolutely made, everything will come easy, the sufferer thinks. And such had been Clare's feeling when she set out upon that wretched ramble, with Barbara toiling after her. She would cut herself off at once, and for ever, from all possibility of being remonstrated with, talked over, moved by any argument. She would cut the knot by one arbitrary action, and free herself. And when that was once successfully done she could live without sympathy, without any desire to cast herself upon the aid of others; she would be self-sufficing, self-contained, self-restraining all the rest of her life. Had not she already tried every relationship, and found it wanting? He who had made himself most dear to her—he who had pretended to love her, had deceived her. Every

friend she had, in all probability, would disapprove of the encouragement she had given to Arthur, and would equally disapprove of the summary and insulting way in which she had cast him off. Her father—— Clare's whole being surged up into excitement as she thought of him—excitement produced by two words which she had spied through a torn envelope, and which, perhaps, meant nothing in the world. Her brother—— Clare's heart sank again into a sickness and miserable failing of all strength and composure. She was alone, absolutely alone, on the face of the earth. She had no one to fall back upon, to consult on such a terrible dilemma as never surely woman was placed in before. Walking under that blazing sun was fortunately of itself confusing and exhausting enough; but when she reached the Three Beeches, and sat down under their shadow, all the excitement in her mind seemed to meet and clash, filling up her brain with a buzz and sound which almost drove her mad. Not one great battle only, but two or three were raging within her, exploding now from one quarter, now from another, like a network of storms. The Three Beeches stood upon an elevated point, not very high in itself, but possessing all the importance of a hill in that level country. The trees were very fine old trees, with great gnarled trunks, and such a wealth

of shadow under them as made the traveller rejoice. Seated on the thick mossy turf, Clare looked down and saw her home among its trees, and the bright white street of the village, and the Red House, burning in the sunshine. Even Thornleigh Church, which was seven miles off, was visible in the sunny distance. Almost every individual involved in the dim and confused drama which was weaving itself about her was at present, could she but see under those roofs, within her range of vision. She let her books, which she had brought with the intention of working hard at a translation, and thus making thought impossible, lie beside her, without so much as remembering their existence. Thinking! How could she help thinking? As long as there is nothing particular in your mind it is, of course, easy enough to occupy it with external matters; but when it is full—full to overflowing—— So Clare thought and thought till her mind felt on the eve of giving way. Arthur Arden had done her a great wrong—she thought he had done her such a wrong as a woman can never forgive to a man—not only preferred another to her, but made false pretences of love to her in order to enjoy that other's society. Injury and contempt could go no further. He had wounded her heart, and struck a deadly blow at her maidenly dignity and pride. It was

the bitterest wrong, and as such she had resented it.

And yet perhaps Arthur Arden had been wronged as bitterly; perhaps he had unconsciously suffered all his life, and Providence had thrown the means of avenging him into her hands. Edgar, too, had been wronged, not in the same way, but by being made an instrument of injury. But from the thought of Edgar she shrank as if it hurt her. And her father, whom she had held in such reverence, whom she had worshipped as the very embodiment of all the Ardens, whom she had loved so much, and who had loved her—Clare shrank as if a shower of blows were hailing upon her head. She had thrust herself into his secrets, and now she must bear the burden. If she had pried over his shoulder while he was living, how poor, how dishonourable she would have felt herself; but she had done worse than that. She had stolen a surreptitious glance at his secrets after he was dead. Then she tried to calm herself down. Perhaps the words she had read did not mean what they seemed to mean. Perhaps they referred to something perfectly innocent, some piece of generosity on her father's part of which he had said nothing to any one. But Clare felt that even were this the case she must bear the penalty of her prying. She dared not

examine further. Her half-secret, which perhaps was no secret, must be the burden of her existence. Never would she breathe it to any one, never allow she knew it; never, never escape from its burning presence. If there was wrong involved, she must allow that wrong to go on; she must not even permit herself to see or approach the man who was the sufferer. And then, all at once, in the midst of her rage and indignation against him, and while she still felt that no punishment was too great to requite his treachery, there suddenly came upon poor Clare, in her inexperience and ignorance, a fit of such yearning for him as rent her very heart. What! with her injury so fresh, with all that anger and bitterness in her mind? Dismayed, bewildered, torn asunder, she thus found out that love will not go out of the heart at any formal bidding. It turned and rent her, like the demon, convulsing her very soul with pain. She opened her heavy eyes after the struggle with a despairing amazement in them. Could it be? Was her judgment to go for nothing, and the bitter wound which he had inflicted to be no argument against him? Nothing but this sudden, appalling, unlooked-for experience could have convinced her. She felt so weak and miserable that she dropped her face into her hands, and wept, she who had been so indignant and so strong.

"Miss Arden, I'm afraid you're feeling poorly," said Barbara. "Do now, there's a dear young lady, take this glass of wine. I made Mrs. Fillpot give it me for you, and I've kept it cool in the bottom of the basket. Do, Miss, there's a dear."

"I don't want anything, Barbara," said Clare; and in the greatness of her misery, she who had made up her mind for the rest of her life to be self-sufficing, to hide her secret in the depths of her being, and ask no one for sympathy, had all the difficulty in the world to keep from throwing her arms round Barbara's neck, and weeping on her breast. She restrained the impulse, however, and kept her head away, and preserved her pride for the moment. This was, alas, how her heart treated Clare, after she had made up her mind that one decision was all that was necessary. She made her decision, expecting henceforward everlasting sadness, but calm; whereas, on the contrary, she was a prey to shock after shock, her heart melting, her resolution giving way, a hundred struggles going on within her. Her very determination made everything worse instead of better. "If you had not thrust everybody from you, if you had not condemned unheard, if you had not come away, and insulted, and abandoned him, all might yet have been well," said the traitor within. And thus poor Clare waded

in the very deepest of waters all that long miserable day.

It was nightfall when she returned to the house. Time had gone imperceptibly, as it goes when there is nothing tangible in it. Long threads of reverie linked themselves into each other, going on and on as if they need never end, and coming back after all manner of digressions to the same central subject. "Don't you think it's time to be going, Miss?" the maid would say timidly from time to time. "Presently," Clare would reply, hopelessly opening or shutting the book she had taken into her hands; but at length the sun began to sink, and it was evident they must begin their walk if they were to reach Arden before night. Clare swallowed Barbara's glass of wine, and then set out upon the weary way. "It has been a nice quiet day," she said, mechanically, fibbing with the instinct of good society, as she got up. "I hope it has done you good, Miss," said Barbara, doubtfully. "Oh, all the good in the world," said Clare. And with this forlorn fiction she walked home again; so much less sure of her own constancy; so much more doubtful of the possibility of shutting up secrets in a silence as of the grave, and living a perpetual life of sacrifice, without hope or call for sympathy, than she had been in the morning. She

was very weary when she got home, weary in body and mind, and could only answer with a faint smile to the message which Wilkins gave her from her cousin. Jeanie had not kept him back to-day; only one day had he been kept back by all the united influences which could be brought to bear upon him. Had not she been hard upon him, sending him summarily away from her for one offence, he who perhaps all his life had been wronged so bitterly? Had he been wronged? Or was it a dream? And had he wronged her—or was this but a cloud that might pass away? When Clare had got rid of the servants, who worried her, and had also got rid of the poor pretence of dining which she went through in order not to reveal to them too clearly the commotion in her mind, she had another struggle with herself. Whether he had wronged her or had been wronged, surely it was best now to keep him at arm's length. Better not to see him again, never to attempt to lean her cares upon him, to confide her difficulties to him. Oh, no, no! He must never come again. And Clare said to herself that she must live and die alone.

When the servants had gone to bed she went into the library once more in her dressing-gown with her candle, and unlocked all its fastenings, and

took out the bundle of papers to look at it. The words she had seen, which had woke her out of one dream of pain into another, and which had shaken her being so profoundly, were covered over now by the envelope into which she had thrust them. She took it out and weighed it in her hands—the neat harmless little packet, which looked as if it could harm nobody! What right had she to think it would harm any one? Clare took it out as if it had been something explosive, and weighed it, and gazed at it. All the house was silent. There was not one creature in it who was not sleeping or seeking sleep. Her own light and the dim one which awaited her in her chamber upstairs were the only signs of life in the great, silent, locked-up place. It was guarded without from every kind of assault; but who could ward off the enemies who existed insidious within?

Clare sat revolving this problem until the night was far gone. She did not seem able to leave it; and yet her thoughts made no progress. Was she the guardian of Arden, watching over that secret, unable to give it up, keeping the house and the family from harm? She thought it was some demon which kept tempting her to open the packet, and discover all. Most likely it would be the best thing to do. Most likely what she would

find out on a closer examination would altogether clear up those words which had thrilled her through and through as with an electric touch. They were her father's papers. Was it not her duty to find out what was in them, to be ready to vindicate her father's memory should anyone ever assail it? She sat and weighed the papers in her hand, and listened to all the mysterious sounds and mutterings of the night, till at last her mind became incapable of any personal action, and she felt it grow into a furious battle-field of the two opinions which charged and encountered and were repulsed, and rallied again, and tore her in sunder. It was more weariness than anything else which prompted her at last to the step she took. She was reluctant to think of Edgar at all in the present state of her mind, and yet it was he who was most deeply concerned. After she had discussed it with herself for hours she rose up from the bureau at the bidding of a sudden impulse, and sat down in her father's chair. It was a chair which nobody ever occupied, which the servants were afraid of—and Clare could not but feel with involuntary superstition that her father himself was somehow superintending this action of hers. She drew towards her the blotting book he had used, and which contained his paper—paper which no one had made any use of since his

death. Was it he who was dictating to her, holding her pen, guiding her in this tardy justice? Her letter was very short, concise, and restrained. Before she began to write she did not feel as if she could address him again, or could know what to say; but old use and wont came to her aid.

“DEAR EDGAR (this is what Clare wrote)—I have found something among my father’s papers which seems to me very important—important to everybody, and to you above all. I have not read it—only just seen a word or two, which have made me very unhappy. I thought I would try to keep it from you, but I find I cannot. Come, then, and see what it means. It is of more importance than anything you can be doing. Come immediately, if I may ask that much of you. Come without any delay. C. A.”

This was all the subscription she could bring herself to put. When she had read it over and placed it in an envelope, she put it down on the Squire’s blotting book in front of his seat. It was a kind of test which she felt herself to be applying. If the letter disappeared before morning she would accept it as a supernatural intimation that it ought not to be sent. If not—— To such a pass her

mind had come, which was in general so free from any fear or consciousness of the supernatural. When she had done this she took up her packet again and went upstairs, and replaced it under her pillow. And thus worn out with all she had gone through Clare slept. She had not expected it, but she fell asleep like a child. Fatigue, excitement, and that long conflict had been of use to her in this one way from which she could derive any help or consolation. And then she had done something which must be decisive, and settle the matter without any further action of her own.

CHAPTER XX.

WHILE all these schemes and dreams were going on at Arden Edgar was learning to accustom himself to the life of a young man about town—a thing which it was almost as hard for him to do as it would have been for any of the male butterflies whom he was attempting to emulate to settle down to work. Edgar found it very hard work to adapt himself to the systematic diversions of society—to portion out his hours and engagements on the theory of killing time, and getting through as much amusement as possible. To him the world was full of amusement taken simply by itself, or else of something more satisfactory, more important, which made amusement unnecessary. He did not know what it was to be vacant of interest either in his own affairs or those of his neighbours, and consequently a system which is built upon the theory that Time is man's enemy, and must be killed laboriously, did not at all suit him—but yet his mind was so fresh that he found it possible to

shift his interest, to get concerned about the new people round him and their new ways, which were so wonderful. Not the German professors, with their speculations, their talk, their music, and their *bier-garten*, nor their wives and daughters, at once so notable and so sentimental, nor the English farmers and peasants of Arden, were really so wonderful to Edgar as the ways of Mayfair in June. He would sit and listen with eyes which shone with fun and wonder while the people about him went gravely on making and re-making their engagements, promising to go there, promising not to go here, rising into wild excitement about a difficult invitation, dining, dancing, driving, riding, sauntering at flower shows, at Zoological gardens, at afternoon teas, at garden parties, counting the Row and the Park as sacred duties, considering as serious occupation the scribbling of half-a-dozen notes, and considering the gossip about Lord This and Lady That to be matter of European interest. And how seriously they did it all! How important they felt themselves with all that mass of engagements on hand—every hour of every day forestalled! Edgar looked on laughing, and then gradually got beyond laughing. It was difficult for so sympathetic a spirit to live long in such an atmosphere without beginning to feel that there must be some intrinsic

value in the system which was held in such high esteem by all around him. He was bewildered in his great candour. He laughed, and then, growing silent, only smiled, and then began to ponder and wonder and ask himself questions. Perhaps it was well on the whole that as the apex of a great social system founded upon a vast basis of labour and suffering and pain, there should be this human froth, or rather those bubbles sparkling in the sun—those snowy foam-wreaths and gleaming surface ripples to cover and beautify the depths below. Was it well? He could not come to any very satisfactory conclusion with himself. It was easy to laugh, and easy to condemn, and equally easy, when one was trained to it, to take it as the natural condition of affairs; but here, as in all other cases, it was the attempt to discriminate what was good and what was bad—what was mere frivolity and what had some human use in it, which was the difficult matter. The puzzle brought a look of wonder to Edgar's brown eyes. "Are you going to Lady Thistledown's to-night?" Harry Thornleigh would say to him; "it is a horrible bore." "Why should you go then?" Edgar would answer. "My dear fellow, everybody will be there." "And everybody will be bored," said Edgar; "and if everybody survives it, will do the same to-morrow,

and to-morrow, and to-morrow. Why don't you do something that interests you, all you fellows?" "That would be a still more confounded bore," said Harry. And what could the new man do but shrug his shoulders and give up the discussion?

He himself was the only one perhaps among them who was not in the least bored. There was something even in Lady Thistledown's party that occupied Edgar. Sometimes he was interested, sometimes amused, and sometimes very much saddened by what he saw. And then personal risks surrounded him, which he did not in the least understand or realise. "Lady Augusta is to be there, I suppose, and your sisters, so that I don't think I shall be bored," he had said to Harry Thornleigh in reference to this very party; and Harry said nothing, but opened his eyes very wide at this plain speaking. "Which of them is it, I wonder?" he mused to himself as he went off. "Gussy, I hope;" for Gussy was her brother's favourite, and he felt it would be very pleasant, as Lady Augusta did, to have the pleasantest and brightest and most sweet-tempered of the girls settled so near as Arden. But in point of fact Edgar had no intention of settling any one at Arden. He was still quite faithful to his sister's sway. If Clare were to marry and go away, then

indeed he would no doubt feel the loneliness uncomfortable; but at present it would have seemed something like high treason to Edgar to dethrone his sister. Such an idea had never entered into his mind. But he was fond of Lady Augusta, who was like a mother to him, and he was fond of her daughter—indeed, of all her daughters—whom he regarded with the freshest and most cordial sentiment. He was always ready to get their carriage, to do anything for them. He was not afraid, as so many men were, to *afficher* himself; and, therefore, as society does not understand brotherly affection on the part of a young man towards young women, everybody decided that one of the Thornleigh girls was to be his lawful owner. There was some difficulty in the common mind as to which was the fortunate individual; but Gussy was so distinctly indicated by the family for the post that naturally no one else had a chance against her. And this conclusion was really the most natural that could be drawn. Edgar, though he was so friendly and so frank, was yet in some respects a shy man, and he clung to the people he knew best. When he was with the Thornleighs he was free from every shade of embarrassment—he knew them all so well (he thought); they were so kind to him—they understood him and his ways of thinking so completely

(he believed). When he went to them it was like going home—entering into his family—a more genial family, and one more apt to understand, than he had ever known.

And it was to the Thornleighs that Edgar allowed himself to speak most freely of his own wonderments and perplexities. “I look at you all with amazement,” he said. “I don’t disapprove of you.” (“How very nice of him,” interrupted Gussy.) “You look very pretty (“Thanks,” said Beatrice, making him a curtsy), and you are very pleasant. Of course, I don’t mean ladies in particular (“Oh, you savage,” ejaculated Mary, the second youngest, who was a little disposed to hold Helena’s views, but did not understand them in the very least), I mean everybody. All this is very nice. It is charming never to take any thought for the morrow, except which invitation one will accept, or rather which place one will go to, of all that one has accepted. The only thing is, what is the good of it all? It tires you so that you require nine months’ rest to refresh you, and get you up to the point of doing all this over again; and while you are doing it, you call heaven and earth to witness what a bore it is. Would it not be better to try some other kind of useful exertion now and then? Three months’ work in the fields, for instance, or

as poor needlewomen, or even in one of those pretty shops——”

“Oh, a shop! that is worse and worse; that is more frightful than ever. I should prefer the fields,” said Beatrice and Mary in a breath.

“The fields are exposed to a great deal of rain and cold, drought and wet, frost, and all kinds of perils,” said Edgar; “and then they would spoil your complexions. Ask Lady Augusta; she would never let you do that. But these beautiful shops, you know, such as that you took me to—Smallgear or something; and then that one in Regent Street. Why, they are palaces; soft carpets under your feet, and great mirrors to display you in, and beautiful things to handle. I should think it rather nice to belong to one of those shops.”

“You can’t possibly mean it?” cried Gussy, concerned for the credit of the man who was so generally assigned to her. “Fancy what an occupation it must be, turning over things to be pulled about by ladies who don’t know what to do with themselves otherwise, and never mean to buy.”

“Well,” said Edgar, “we are not criticising, we are merely taking facts as we find them. If it amuses the ladies to turn the things over, the men in the shops are really more useful to them than the other men who go to their five o’clock tea.

And now and then there comes a *bona fide* purchaser. Whereas for you young ladies what could be better ? trying on pretty shawls and things (I saw them), exercising the highest qualities of self-denial, making your prettiness and gracefulness of use to others, and yet having your time to yourselves say after six or seven o'clock. You would see the best of company all the same, *par dessus la marché*. Don't you think it would be a very pleasant change ? ”

“ If you would treat it seriously, and really consider how little women are allowed to do, Mr. Arden,” cried Helena Thornleigh, who was too much in earnest to encourage mere chatter like her sisters. “ I am sure you might be a great help to us. *You* see what a desert our lives are, with no object in them. You see what vapid, aimless, useless creatures the most of us are——”

“ I beg your pardon,” said Edgar. “ I feel that it is frightfully selfish, but all my sympathies, in the first place, are for my own class. Stop till I have made that out. I will come to the ladies by-and-bye. We never have a moment's time for anything ; we are always pursued by work which has to be done, whether it is riding in the park, or going to the opera, or dining at Richmond. How stern duty runs after your brother, for instance, always reminding him of some engagement or

other. Poor Harry finds it a dreadful bore. He says so, and he ought to know best. He is always bemoaning his hard fate, and yet he always goes on obeying it. I don't object to routine, and I don't object to suffering. They are both good things enough; but to suffer and be a slave to routine all for nothing is very hard—I confess I think it is very hard. To be sure, Harry need not do it unless he likes; but that he should like, and should go on doing it, and should not be able to find something better, that is what puzzles me."

"I say," said Harry, who was half-dozing over a book, "what is that about me? I don't want to be made to point a moral in this house. The girls turn me to that use fast enough. What is Arden saying now?"

"Nothing that is very remarkable," said Edgar; "only that we poor fellows, or you poor fellows, don't get half enough credit for the hard life you lead. You give yourselves as much trouble as if you were founding a state or reforming society, and all the time you are doing nothing. I don't object to it. If a man likes to spend his life so, why, of course, he is free to do it: he is a British subject like the rest of us. But I want to know who invented this theory of existence, and how men were got to give in to it—that is all."

"It is all they are good for," said Helena Thornleigh. "It is partly education and partly nature. Boys are brought up to think that they are to have everything they want. They are never obliged to deny themselves or think of others. However silly or frivolous a thing may be, they are free to do it if they like. And they have everything open to them; they go where they like, they live as they please——"

"And a very fine thing they make of it," said Edgar, reflectively, as the young reformer paused for breath. "Miss Thornleigh, when you begin to work upon the young ladies, I think I ought to have a try at the men. We might go halves in a crusade. We should disagree in this, though—for I am quite satisfied with the ladies. You are all very nice; you are just what you ought to be."

"Mr. Arden, I hate compliments," said Helena, growing red with indignation. "When you make those sort of speeches I should like to do something disagreeable. We are not in the least nice. Oh, I don't believe in your crusade; you are not half earnest enough. You laugh and jibe and then you ask us to believe that you have a serious meaning. That is not how I should take it up. You don't half understand, you don't realise how serious it is——"

"Then I may not share in the missionary work?" said Edgar; and he was a little surprised when Gussy interposed, with a slight flush on her face.

"If you were working with Helena, people would not believe much in your seriousness," said Gussy; "they would not give you much credit, either one or the other. Missions *à deux* are not understood in society—or I suppose they are too well understood," said Gussy, with a laugh. She had been aggravated, as everybody may perceive. Edgar was her special property, allotted to her by the world in general, and what had Helena to do with him, cutting in like this with her missionary work and her nonsense? Gussy felt that she had very good reason to be put out.

And Helena, though she was a missionary, was woman enough to see the justice of the irritation and to cover her sister's retreat. "I hate missions *à deux*," she said. "We had much better go on in our own way. And then, what Mr Arden wants and what I want are two very different things. He is only amused, but it goes to my very heart——"

"What, Miss Thornleigh?"

"To look round upon all the women I know, and see them without any occupation," said Helena; "dressing and dancing, that is about all we do. And when we make an effort after something

better we are snubbed and thrust down on every side. Our people stop us, our friends sneer at us ; they tell us to go and amuse ourselves. But I am sick of amusing myself. I have done it for three years, and I hate it. I want something better to do."

"But Harry does not hate it," said Edgar, turning his eyes once more upon the eldest son. Harry was not at all a bad fellow. He tossed the book he had been reading away from him, and twisted his moustache, and pulled his snow-white cuffs. "I think it's a confounded bore," said Harry, and then he got up and strolled away.

This conversation took place in a house which had shuddered from garret to basement at the thought of not being able to get cards for Lady Bodmiller's ball. Harry had roused himself up for that occasion, and had shown an energy which was almost superhuman. He had rushed about London as if his mission had been to stop a war or save a kingdom. His scheme of operations was as elaborate and careful as if it had been a campaign. And even Helena had forgotten all about the injuries of women, and had rushed to meet her brother at the door and to ask "What news?" with as much eagerness as if she thought dancing the real employment of life. Such relapses into levity may

be pardoned to a young philosopher; but they were very strange to Edgar who, with the wondering clear mystified eyes of a semi-savage, was looking on.

CHAPTER XXI.

IT was not, however, Edgar Arden's intention to preach any crusade. On the contrary, the first impulse of his friendly and neighbour-loving soul was to find out some reason for the existence which seemed so strange to him. He tried to approach, in a great many different ways, and evoke out of it, as it were, or surprise out of it, its secrets. It could not exist, he said to himself, without a meaning. Edgar was not very profound in his philosophy, but still he had a way of thinking of what he saw, and his amused interest in everything led him into a world of questions. Besides, he was not merely conversant with Harry Thornleigh and his class, but also with various other divisions of society. He saw a good deal of Lord Newmarch, for instance, who was entirely a different kind of man; and he renewed his acquaintance with some men whom he had met abroad in his earlier days, one of whom was a great cricketer, and another who was of the Alpine Club, and whose soul dwelt habitually in

the sacred recesses of the Matterhorn or Jungfrau. Except Lord Newmarch and his set, these men were all utterly disinterested, pursuing their favourite amusements, not for any purpose to be gained, but for the mere sake of the pursuit itself. The Alpine Club man had no curiosity about the view from the mountain-head, and cared nothing for the formation of the glaciers, or any other subject connected with his mountains: all his object was to get to the top; and he did get to a great many tops, and distinguished himself, and acquired various bits of practical knowledge, which, having no connection of purpose or interest in his mind, were of little use to himself, and none to others. And so likewise the men who devoted themselves to society did not expect to be amused, or instructed, or to meet people they liked, or to find in it any of those solaces which theorists pretend. They went because everybody went—because it was the right thing to do—just for the sake of going, and no other reason. This disinterestedness was the great thing that struck Edgar. He himself was aware that he did not at all possess it. He was continually desiring some result—pleasure or advantage of some description, which, when you come to think of it (he reflected), is a mean way of treating existence after all. Whereas, society was grand in its indifference to

any issue. It lived, it assembled, it talked, it went to and fro, and gave itself a great deal of trouble; and from all this exertion it expected nothing to come. This was the first discovery Edgar made, or thought he made; and it staggered him much in the contempt for society which he had been settling into. Was not this in reality a higher principle than his own? It bewildered him, and he could not make it out; and Lord Newmarch, though he was a social philosopher of much greater experience than Edgar, did not seem capable of giving him any aid.

"I don't know what you mean by disinterestedness," Lord Newmarch said. "There is nobody who is disinterested. We have some selfish object in whatever we do. I think, for my own part, that I desire sincerely the good of the country, and make it the grand object of my life; but I know that I want the country to be benefited in *my* way, not in any one else's. We are all like that. There is my brother Everard, do you see, making himself very agreeable to that great fat woman. He hates fat women, and that one in particular, I know; but he is being so very civil to her because he wants her to ask him to her garden party, which is coming off next week. He is going to call her carriage for her, like a humbug as he is—but all with the most selfish and interested motives."

"I allow that," said Edgar. "I allow that anybody will do anything for an invitation; but why should he wish to go to her garden party? That is what I want to know."

"My dear fellow," said Lord Newmarch, shrugging his shoulders, "why, even I am going! everybody will be there."

"Does he want to meet everybody?" said Edgar. "He does continually, and he is sick of them. Does he want to see any one in particular? Does he think he will enjoy himself? Is it for the pleasure of it he is going? When he has got his invitation he will say, what a confounded bore! He knows exactly beforehand what it will be like. Well, then, I say he is utterly disinterested. He is going for the sake of going. It is not to make him happier, or amuse him, or benefit him. And everybody is going just for the same reason. Surely something might be made of this wonderful disinterestedness! It cannot be meant to be wasted upon garden parties and Lady Bodmiller's ball."

"My dear Arden, you mistake completely," said Lord Newmarch, with even a little irritation. "Disinterestedness! nonsense! Don't you see they want it to be known they have been there; everybody will be there. And out of the list, if one name was wanting, don't you see that the owner of

it would lose a certain position. He would feel himself left out. Of course, you have a card. You are one of the most eligible young men of the season. There is no telling what fears and hopes you are exciting in some gentle breasts. Disinterested! That shows how little you know."

And even Lord Newmarch laughed—a refined little laugh—not much like him. He was drawn out of his usual *rôle* for the moment by the exceeding simplicity of his friend—a thing he could not help laughing at. "Why, there is no saying how many fair huntresses will go there in search of you," he said. "These are the happy hunting-grounds where every woman is permitted to shoot, and none of the men dare run away."

"I was not speaking of women," said Edgar, sharply, for he had a kindness for women. "I was talking of your brother and the rest. These are not happy hunting-grounds for them. There is nothing there for them except the mere fact that they *are* there. They go for the sake of going. The other is poor enough, but still it is a motive if it exists. The question is, which is finest, my stupid search for a motive, or your brother's grand disinterestedness. There is something splendid, don't you think, in seeing a man throw away his life like this?"

“What do you mean by throwing away a man’s life?” cried the social philosopher. “You have become dreadfully highflown. An hour or two in an afternoon, in a pretty garden, with well-dressed people about, and a band, and all that—I don’t understand what you mean.”

To this Edgar made no reply. His antagonist had the best of it; and yet he was right, and his theory was just. As for the poor ladies who went to those happy hunting-grounds—if there was any truth in it—that was a branch of the subject more melancholy and more intricate still. Edgar preferred not to enter into it. He thought of Helena Thornleigh and her visions, poor girl—visions which, perhaps, were only evidences of a spasmodic state of conflict against the happy hunting-grounds. Fancy Clare going out with her bow and her spear like the other young Dianas! Edgar thought to himself. But then Clare was rich: she had no need to become a huntress. She, like himself, would be the pursued and not the pursuer. This thought made the young man faint and sick. What a ghastly light it threw upon all these pretty parties and assemblies of pleasure! Even the men who sought nothing were better than this.

“Women are so much more practical than we are,” said Lord Newmarch. “I see it constantly.

Now that I think of it, there is some truth in what you say. The young fellows are singularly without motive. I don't see the beauty of it as you do. They do what other people do; but the women always have an object—they are trying to marry their daughters or to marry themselves, or to rise in the social scale, or something which is definite. They are practical, but not in a large way. That is what prevents them from being so useful in the way of public work as they ought to be. They won't or they can't take a broad view. They fasten upon some matter of fact, and stick to that. It is all very well, you know, for a girl with Helena Thornleigh's notions to talk as she does, in that grand, vague way. But observe how women will pick up a subject—probably a nasty subject—and harp upon it. I could give you a hundred instances. They are not nasty women, that is the odd thing. I suppose it is from some feeling of duty not to shrink from what is most repugnant to them—so instead of shrinking they make a pounce upon it, and hold by it in the most aggravating way. I don't know a woman who takes a really large view except your sister, Arden. She is the sort of girl that would help a man, that would be of real use——”

“She is much obliged to you, I am sure,” said

Edgar, interrupting him ; “but we were not talking of my sister—nor, indeed, of women at all. Let us settle with the others first. You don’t seem to understand that I want information. I want to know why these sons of piratical land-acquiring Saxons, and conquering Normans, and robber Danes, and marauding Celts—every one of them getting and taking as much as ever they could—should have got into this habit of spending their lives for nothing, neither gain nor honour, nor pleasure nor advantage to others, nor profit to themselves—that is what I can’t make out.”

“This sort of thing only lasts for three months or so,” said Lord Newmarch ; “then there is grouse, and so forth. Never mind them—they can take care of themselves. But, Arden, I wish you would make up your mind to go into Parliament, and give your attention to more serious matters. We have too many of those young fellows who mean nothing, and we have too many who mean just one thing in particular, your rich cotton-spinners, and so forth. They are not bad so far as they go, but they are like women—they never take a broad view. They think themselves Radicals, but some of them are as narrow and limited as old wives in a village. And then there are our old squires, who are narrow in another way. They don’t understand things as this

century understands them. The most enlightened of them will turn short round upon you all at once, and join in some insane cry. We want young men, Arden—men of independent minds, who have been used to think for themselves. If you were a Tory of the old Arden type you would have been the last man I should have made overtures to. And what is odd about it is, that your sister is out-and-out of the old Arden type, and yet, for the best kind of reform I should trust her instincts. She is not one of those who would be afraid of such words as liberty or despotism. Liberty means something more than giving a man a vote, and the people never like you any the worse for using a little dignified force. It must be real force, however, not sham, and it must be used with dignity. Your sister fully understands——”

“Never mind my sister,” said Edgar, with some impatience.

“But I must mind your sister,” said Lord Newmarch. “My dear Arden, I wish so much you would give me your ear for a little. I never met anyone who entered into all my views like Miss Arden. I cannot tell you—for anything I could say would sound exaggerated—how much I admire her. I have too great a respect for her to venture to approach herself till I have your approval. If

you should know any obstacle, any difficulty—you must know better than anyone what a treasure she is.”

Edgar was disposed to be angry, and then he was disposed to laugh, but he did neither, feeling himself in too grave a position to permit any levity. “Confound the fellow!” he said to himself. “You take me very much by surprise,” he said when he had composed himself a little. “I had not the least expectation of any such proposal from you——”

“Why not from me?—from any other, then?” asked Newmarch with anxiety. “I thought you could not fail to remark before I left your house. Ah, Arden, that never-to-be-forgotten visit! I had known her before, of course, for years—but there are moments when a woman’s existence bursts upon you like a revelation, however long you may have known her. Such a revelation then happened to me. So beautiful, so dignified, so truly liberal in her views, so full of real insight! I have every reason to believe that such a match would receive the most complete sanction of my family, and I trust it would not be disagreeable to you.”

“I am sure you do Clare and myself great honour,” said Edgar, “but you must pardon me for being quite unprepared. I don’t know in the least what my sister’s feelings may be; of course it is

for her, and for her alone, to decide. You know I have been little at home. I know of no difficulties, no——; but my opinion on this point is really of very little importance,” he continued, pausing with a recollection of Arthur Arden which was anything but comforting. “It is Clare only who can decide.”

“But if such a happiness should be in store for me,” said Lord Newmarch, always correct in his expressions, “I might hope that I should meet with no disapproval from you?”

“Whatever my sister’s decision should be, you may be sure I shall do my best to carry it out,” said Edgar, who was confused by this sudden attack; and they stood together for five minutes in an embarrassed silence, and then separated, to the great relief of both. This sudden declaration was to Edgar what a bomb suddenly falling without any warning would be to the inhabitants of a peaceful town. He was quite unprepared for it; his mind was full of other things, occupied with a hundred novelties quite detached for the moment from Arden and its concerns. He had even half forgotten the original cause which made him leave home, and his fears for his sister. He walked to his rooms that evening from the house where this conversation had taken place, and found himself thrown back at once

to his home and its more intimate concerns. He had left Clare alone—much to his annoyance—but she assured him she preferred being alone ; and Arthur Arden had given him the slip, and declined his invitation to spend the remainder of the season with him in town. Clare had not mentioned Arthur in any of her letters. No doubt he must be at the end of the world, forming new plans, perhaps pursuing some new love. It was folly to think of him as Edgar felt himself doing the moment Clare's affairs were thus brought before his mind. He had been so easily able to dismiss Arthur that he had ceased thinking of him as dangerous—but now he kept presenting himself like a spectre wherever Edgar turned his eyes. “I wonder where the fellow is. I wonder how those fellows manage. He ought to have a secured income,” he said to himself ; and yet could not make out why it was that when he ought to be thinking of Clare it was Arthur Arden he began to think of—Arthur, who had divined Lord Newmarch, and hated him. Edgar's mind was full of excitement. It is so much more easy to philosophise about things which don't affect ourselves personally. He had been amused and quite calm when he discussed with himself the doings of Mayfair, but when it was Arden that was the subject of his thoughts he was not calm. Thus it

was the most steady and serious among all his friends and acquaintances who threw this sudden barb into Edgar's life.

CHAPTER XXII.

"I DON'T think you are happy in town, Mr. Arden," said Gussy Thornleigh the next time Edgar presented himself in Berkeley Square; "and when we saw you last at home you said you were not coming. What made you resolve to come after all?"

The truth was that Gussy supposed it was herself who had made him come: this had been taken for granted by all the family, and Gussy naturally had believed it, or at least had tried to believe it—a point on which, however, her good sense made a feeble conflict with that happy girlish vanity, which as yet had not experienced many rebuffs. Privately in the retirement of her own chamber she had already disclosed her scepticism to her sister Helena. "I don't believe he came after me," she said. "Mamma thinks so, and Harry thinks so, but I believe it is only their innocence. They don't understand Edgar Arden. He is fond of me and he is fond of you, and he does not care a bit for either of us. That is my opinion. He wants to

make friends of us all the same as if we were not girls."

"And why shouldn't he?" asked Helena with some indignation; not that she cared for Edgar Arden, but for the principle. "His being a man does not make any difference to me; and why should it make a difference to him that I am a girl?"

"Ah, but it does make a difference," said wiser Gussy. "Perhaps not when people are older; but I don't know any except fast girls who go and *afficher* their friendship with men. I don't think he came for me. I think I shall ask him some day, quite promiscuous, that he may not be put on his guard—and I shall soon see if it is for me."

It was in accordance with this resolution that she spoke, and her question was "quite promiscuous," as she said, interjected into the midst of a conversation with which it had nothing to do. Edgar bore the test with a composure which satisfied Gussy's intellect at once, though it somewhat depressed her in spite of herself.

"I could not help it," he said quite seriously, "It seemed a way out of a difficulty. I am not quite sure now that it was a wise way, but then it seemed the best."

Gussy looked at him with a little surprise. He

was so perfectly composed and unmoved, evidently quite unaware of the interpretation that had been placed on his change of purpose. She was not in love with him in the very least, and yet it was a shock to her vanity to see how unconscious he was of the supposed reason. "He might have complimented and made belief a little," she said to herself; "there is no need for being so deadly sincere."

"How odd that you should have to do anything like that," she said aloud; "it is like one of our expedients; but you can do just as you like, at least Helena tells us so, and I suppose men can——"

"I don't think men can," said Edgar, laughing; "at least not men like myself. The fact was, I had a guest whom I did not wish to keep any longer. You must be kind, and not betray me."

"Certainly," said Gussy with promptitude, opening her eyes wide at the same time in wonder at such a confession. "Don't be angry with me," she resumed; "I do so like to know everything about my friends. Do tell me! Was it Arthur Arden? Mamma would scold me dreadfully for asking; but I should so like to know. There, don't tell me any more. I can see it was by your eyes. I know some people don't like him; but he is very nice. I think you might have let him stay."

"Do you think he is very nice?" said Edgar, who was, as she had divined, very fond of Gussy, though not (according to her own dialect) in *that* way.

"Yes," said Gussy, jumping by instinct into the heart of the question. "The thing is, you know—but you serious people cannot understand—that he never *means* anything. He is very attentive, and all that. It is his way with girls. He makes you think there never was any one like you, and that he never had such an opinion of anybody before, and all that; but he never means anything. Even mamma says so. A very young girl might be taken in; but we all know that he means nothing, and I assure you he is very nice."

"I don't understand how such a man can be very nice," said Edgar, with subdued annoyance, for he did not quite like the idea that Gussy herself should have gone through this discipline or made such a discovery. "I like people who mean more and not less than they say."

"That is all very well, Mr. Arden, in most matters," said Gussy, with a little hesitation and a momentary blush. ("I wonder if *he* means anything?" she was asking herself; but Edgar was looking at her with the simplest straightforwardness and making no pretences.) "But, you know,

when it is only just the common chatter of society—— Well, why should everybody be so dreadfully sincere? People may just as well be agreeable. I am not standing up for flirting or that sort of thing. But still, you know, when you are quite sure that nothing is meant——”

“Don’t confuse my mind altogether,” said Edgar. “I am bewildered enough as it is. You go to places not to be amused, but because everybody is going; you do things you don’t care for because everybody does them; and now you tell me men are very ‘nice’ because they never mean anything. My brain is going very fast, but I think this last doctrine is the most confusing of all.”

“You would see the sense of it if you were in our position,” said Gussy, shaking her pretty head. “Now, for instance, Arthur Arden—suppose, just for the sake of argument, that he was really in love with one of us. It sounds ridiculous, does it not? What do you suppose papa and mamma would say? They would send him out of the house very quickly you may be sure; and the poor girl, whoever it was, would be scolded to death. Oh, there would be such a business in the house! Worse than there was when poor Fred. Burton wanted to marry Ada. Perhaps you never heard of that?”

“No, indeed,” said Edgar, to whom Ada, who

was the quiet one, had always appeared the least interesting of the family.

"He was the curate at Thorne," said Gussy; "and, of course, he ought never to have dreamt of such a thing; but Harry had been at college with him, and he was very nice, and came to us constantly. I liked him myself—indeed, we all liked him; and if he only had had two thousand or so a-year, or even less, as he was a clergyman—— But he had only about twopence," said Gussy, with a sigh; "and what was poor papa to do?"

"And Miss Thornleigh?" asked Edgar, with all the impulsive interest in a love story which comes natural to an unsophisticated mind. Ada was sitting at the other end of the room with a great basket before her full of pieces of coloured print. She was making little frocks for her poor children—a work in which by fits and starts the other girls would give her uncertain aid.

"O Ada!" said Gussy, with a little shrug of her shoulders; and then she glanced at her sister, and a glimmer of moisture came into the corners of her bright eyes. "She is the greatest darling that ever was! I don't think there is anybody so good in the whole world!" she said, under her breath, and dashed away that drop of dew from her eyelashes. "It is so absurd to make any fuss," she added a

moment after. "One knows it must be, but one cannot help being sorry sometimes when one sees——" and here Gussy's voice failed her, and she bit her lip, that she might not be proved to have broken down.

"You are a dear, kind girl to feel for her so," cried Edgar, putting out his hand to give her a grasp of sympathy; and then he remembered suddenly that he was a man and she a woman, and that an invisible line was stretched between them. "It is very hard," he said, checking himself with a half laugh, "that you are not your brother, or I my own sister for the moment, because I must not say (I suppose) how sorry I am, nor how I like you for it; but I do all the same. Don't you think if we were to lay our heads together and get him a living——"

"Oh, hush," said Gussy, growing paler, and this time quite unable to conceal the tears that rushed to her eyes. "Did you really never hear about him? He died a year ago. It was not our fault. He went to the East-End of London, you know, and worked dreadfully hard, and caught a fever. Oh, will you take that chair between me and Ada, please! Don't you see she always wears black and white—nothing else—but you men never notice what any one wears."

Edgar made the change as he was desired, and

this time all the etiquettes that ever were invented would not have kept him from taking Gussy's soft hand into his, and holding it kindly, tenderly, as a sympathising brother might have done. He would have taken her into his arms, had he dared, in affectionate kindness and sympathy. He was too much moved to say a word, but he held her hand fast, and looked at her with his heart in his eyes.

"Thanks," said Gussy, crying softly ; " what a kind, friendly boy you are ! Oh, I am sure I never meant to talk of this any more. I was in a fury with papa and mamma at the time, and said a great many things I ought not to have said ; but, of course, one knows that it had to be—they could not have done anything else."

" Couldn't they ?" said Edgar. " Is money everything then ? I am a stranger in this sort of a world, and I don't know."

" If it is not everything, it is a great deal," said Gussy. " And now, can't you understand what I mean when I say a man is nice who can make himself nice, without meaning anything ? Why, there is you," she added, with a spice of malice. " You don't do it in Arthur Arden's way ; but you are very kind to one, and very pleasant ; and it makes one so much at one's ease when one sees you don't mean anything. There ! That is a bold argu-

ment; but now you will understand what I mean to say."

Gussy got up when she had delivered this shot, and ran over to the other side of the room to get her work, as she said, leaving Edgar very silent and considerably bewildered. It was a new sensation to him. Was he supposed to mean anything, he wondered? He felt that he had received an arrow, but he did not quite understand how or why it came; and he was a little sore, it must be confessed, to hear himself classed with Arthur Arden as one of the men who meant nothing. In his own consciousness he meant a great deal—he meant the most cordial brotherliness, affection, and sympathy. He had "taken to" the Thornleighs, as people say. He liked to go to their house; he liked to talk to them all, one almost as much as the others, and Lady Augusta as much as any of her girls. This was what he meant; but could it be that some other meaning was expected of him? Then he noticed with some surprise that Lady Augusta was quite cognisant of the fact that Gussy had left him, and that he was sitting all alone and silent, pondering and confused. Why should she note so very unimportant a transaction? And she called him to her side immediately on a most transparent pretext.

"Mr. Arden, come and tell me your last news from Clare," she said. "It is very hard-hearted of her not to come with you to town. And it must be very dull for her at Arden, all by herself. Has she got old Miss Arden from Escott, or good Mrs. Seldon with her? What, nobody! that must surely be dull even for Clare——"

"So I thought," said Edgar; "but she will not come——"

"And she has so rooted a prejudice against those good people the Pimpernels—it is a pity," said Lady Augusta. "I suppose you know your cousin Arthur Arden is staying there?"

"There?" cried Edgar, "at Arden?" and he half rose to go off at once and guard his sister, whose imprudence it seemed impossible to understand.

"I mean he is at the Pimpernels;" said Lady Augusta. "Alice, I suppose, will have a good deal of money. I have known the day when Arthur Arden could have done a great deal better than that. But neither men nor women improve their case matrimonially by growing older. It will be curious to see him as the husband of Alice Pimpernel."

"But is it certain that because he is her father's guest the other must follow?" said Edgar, who asked the question at random, without thinking

much about it. The answer was a little pointed, and it found a lodgment in his mind.

"Oh dear no, Mr. Arden. But yet the world is apt to ask why does he go there? What does he want in that house? It is a question that is asked whenever a young man visits a great deal at a house where there are girls."

"I did not know that," said Edgar, with a simplicity which went to Lady Augusta's heart. "I believe he is as innocent as a baby," she said afterwards when she was telling the story. "He may be as innocent as he pleases, but he shan't trifle with Gussy," said Harry, putting on a very valiant air. Gussy, for her own part, did not know what to think. "He likes me very well, but that is all," she said to her mother. "I am sure he means nothing. Indeed, mamma, I am quite sure——"

"I don't think you know anything at all about it," said Lady Augusta, with some irritation; for Edgar was her own *protégé*—it was she who had vouched for him, and settled how everything was to be—and not only her pride but her feelings were concerned. She thought she had never met with any one she could like so well for a son-in-law. He was so thoughtful, so considerate, and (a matter which is well worth noting) had the air of liking her too, for herself, as well as for her daughter.

“One could *really* make a son of him,” the poor lady said to herself with a sigh ; for to tell the truth she was sometimes sadly in want of a good son to help her. The girls were very good, but they were only girls, and could not be of all the use a man could—and Harry was quite as much trouble as comfort—and Mr. Thornleigh left everything to his wife. Therefore she was reluctant to give up the idea of Edgar, which was, as we have said, her own idea. It was so seldom that everything that could be desired was to be found united in one person, as in his case. When a man was very “nice” and a comfort to talk to, the chances were he was poor and had to be snubbed instead of encouraged. But Edgar was everything that was desirable, even down to his very local position. So Lady Augusta spoke very sharply even to her favourite daughter when she insinuated that Edgar was indifferent. “You don’t know anything at all about it,” was what she said ; and she clung to the idea with a certain desperation. Arden was so near, and the family was so good, and the rent-roll so satisfactory, and the man so nice. It was impossible to improve the combination which she found in him ; and Lady Augusta’s mind was fully made up to brave a great deal, and do a great deal, before she relinquished the prize which Providence had thrown in her way.

CHAPTER XXIII.

EDGAR left the Thornleighs that day with several quite new subjects of thought. His heart was touched to the very quick by that little revelation which Gussy had made to him of her sister's history. It stopped him quite suddenly in the current of his previous reflections. He had been so full of the unprofitableness and unmeaningness of the new existence into which he found himself thrown, that the discovery of a tragedy so simple and so hopeless, just one step out of it, upset once more all his conclusions. The idea he had been forming was, that within the range of "Society" strong feeling of any kind, much less passion, was impossible—even suffering and death seemed things too great and too human to penetrate within that artificial ring. He could have imagined the same routine going on for ever and ever, without any novelty in it, or touch of the real. Yet here, upon the very edge of the eternal dance, here was a single silent figure who had suffered (as Edgar felt, in the fervour of youth-

ful sympathy) the extremity of human woe. How strange it was! The contrast confused him, and gave another turn, as it were, to his whirling brain. They were then human creatures after all, those people of fashion, whirling on and on in their everlasting round. Sometimes pain, passion, disappointment, tragical rending asunder of hearts and lives, proved their real nature. Perhaps even the man who was trying to take all the use out of his life by means of engagements twenty deep, had been pierced through and through with some such shaft as that which had killed poor Ada's lover. Perhaps some of those women who hurried from one assemblage to another as fast as hours and horses could carry them had suffered in silence all that Ada had done, and lost all savour and sweetness in life like her. Edgar felt himself pulled up short, and paused in his wholesale criticisms. How could he tell—how could any one tell—what lay underneath the surface of the stream? He paused, and then he went off at a tangent, as young philosophers are apt to do, and asked himself whether this flutter and crowding and universal buzz of amusement was not a vast pretence, adopted by common consent, to hide what everybody was suffering underneath? outside an attempt to appear as if they were having things their own way, enjoying to the height of their

capacity all the good the world could give; but underneath a deep universal conviction that life was naught, and happiness a dream! Was this the true theory of life? The question occupied him a great deal more perhaps than the readers of this history will sympathise with; but then, it must be remembered that it was all very new to him, and that every novel phase of life strikes us more strongly than that to which we are accustomed. To Arthur Arden, for instance, the course of existence which startled Edgar was too common to call for a single question. It was the ordinary state of affairs to him. But Edgar knew the other forms so much better. He understood those conditions under which a man labours that he may live. That theory was familiar to him which makes the day's work necessary to the day; but to exist in order to get rid of your existence—to bend all your faculties to the question, not how you are to provide for, but how you are to spend and dispose of your days, that was new to him. And therefore he puzzled over it in a way which a man of fashion to the manner born could not possibly understand. The man of fashion would probably have been quite as much astonished and amazed by Edgar's prejudices in favour of something to do. Something to do! Why, Harry Thornleigh had a hundred things to

do, and never a moment to spare, and yet had never been of use either to himself or any other living creature all his life !

And then this new theory—about what was expected of young men who visited in houses where there were girls—troubled Edgar much. The other question occupied his intelligence, but this one disturbed him in a tenderer point. It hurt his *amour-propre* in the first place ; for to suppose you have been a favourite in a house on your own merits, and then to find that you are only encouraged with a view of providing for a daughter, is sadly humbling to a young man's vanity ; and it hurt him in the affectionate respect he had for women in general and the Thornleighs in particular. He liked them all so kindly and so truly, and had been so pleased to believe that they liked him ; whereas, apparently, it was only on the chance that he should bestow what he had upon one of them that they admitted him so freely. What a disenchantment it was ! Instead of being their friend, whom they had confidence in, he was a man who *meant nothing* like Arthur Arden—a man whose inclinations were speculated upon, and his indifference despised. Edgar asked himself with a certain bitterness which of them it was whom he was expected to address. Perhaps the stately Helena, notwithstanding her

views about the occupations of women, had been given to understand that it was her duty to accept Arden instead ; perhaps Gussy—— But Edgar could not help feeling sore on this subject. He was fond of Gussy, he said to himself ; she was so frank, and so friendly, and so sympathetic, so ready to respond, so willing to communicate. He could not bear the idea that she had been making merchandise of him, and calculating upon Arden—for, of course, it is Arden, not me, he thought. I for myself am nobody—less a great deal than the poor fellow who died, whom they seem to have had a kind of human feeling for. She cried over him even—and laughed, and said I meant nothing, Edgar added, in a sudden flush of pique and dissatisfaction. What meaning, I wonder, did she intend me to have ? From this it will be seen that Edgar Arden was not in love—was not the least in love ; but yet did not care that Gussy should think of him as an article of merchandise—a creature representing settlements and a house of her own. It is a humiliating position for a man to find himself in. It is pleasant (perhaps) to be the object of pursuit, and to feel that mothers and daughters are fluttered by your entrance or exit, or by any silly word it may be your pleasure to address to the young women who are being put up to market. But even to those

young women who are put up to market the transaction is scarcely so humbling as it is to the man, who is reckoned among them not as a man at all, but as so much money, so many lands, so many luxuries. Edgar was cast down by this revelation—down to the very depths. What a fool he had been to think they liked *him*. Was he worth liking by anybody? Was he not rather an insignificant, common-place wretch, unworthy the least notice on his own merits? And he did not in the least desire to be noticed for the sake of Arden. It seemed to him the very last depth of contempt.

For a few days after this Edgar went about very sadly, abstaining from everybody, and feeling very much like a culprit. He kept away from Lady Augusta's pleasant house, and that did not make him any the happier; and then it suddenly occurred to him that he might be thought, in the odious jargon of "society," to be "behaving badly" to Gussy, a thought which stung him so that he seized his hat and rushed out to call, meaning he knew not what—perhaps to ask her piteously if she really wanted Arden, and to offer it to her acceptance. But the room was full of visitors, and Gussy took very little notice of him, and it would be impossible to say how small he felt, how impertinent and presumptuous; but still the thought came back

It is usual to take it for granted that only one or two of the greater and more primitive sentiments are concerned in that great act of marriage, which is so important a matter for good or for evil in human life. People marry for love, which is the natural motive; or they marry for money or money's equivalent—comfort, advancement, and advantageous development of life. And, no doubt, it is very true that in the majority of cases these are the feelings which are most involved. But yet it is astonishing how many secondary motives come in to determine the most momentous of personal decisions. Edgar Arden had never experienced a *grande passion*. He had thought himself in love two or three times in his life, and he knew that he had got over the feeling. It was a thing he was ashamed of when he came to think of it, but nevertheless it was quite true that he had got over it. He had just skimmed the surface of those emotions which culminate in the kind of love which is for ever. At the moment he had thought himself deeply moved, but afterwards, with mingled amusement and shame, he had confessed to himself that it was nothing but a passing ripple which had gone over him. Perhaps he was not of a passionate nature, nor one who would be subject to any tragic force of feeling. His love would be tender and

deep and true, but it would not be wild or all-absorbing, and he was a man who would be capable of considering the interests of the woman he loved apart from himself, which is a kind of generosity sometimes not at all appreciated by the object of such affection. Perhaps, on the whole, the most real lover, the one most attractive to a woman, is the selfish man who wants her for his own happiness, and will have her, whatever the obstacles may be, rather than the disinterested man who prizes her happiness most, and sacrifices himself and lets her go—not sufficiently realising, perhaps, that he has sacrificed her too. But the absence of this impassioned selfishness on Edgar's part laid him open to the action of all the secondary motives. Never did there exist a more friendly affectionate soul. He would have put himself to trouble to procure what it wanted for any child he heard crying by the way. It came natural to him, as it comes natural to some men, by hook or by crook, to secure their own advantage. And if it really should be the case that he himself, or rather Mr. Arden of Arden, was a thing that Gussy Thornleigh wanted very much, and would be the happier for, why should not she have it? The idea was a little absurd, and yet he could not bring forward a single sufficient reason why it should not be so. Actually,

when he considered the matter fully, he had no personal objections. She would be a very sweet, very bright little companion—not a fault could be found with her in any way—— Nay, Edgar was too chivalrous to discuss Gussy or any other woman in this irreverent manner—— What he meant to himself was rather that any man might be proud and happy to have such a wife. And he had no other love to stand between him and her; no; no other love—except that visionary love whom every young man looks to find somewhere, the Una of imagination, the perfect woman. She only, and no other—and she was no woman's rival. No doubt she would fold her wings and drop down out of the skies, and shadow over and melt into the being of Edgar's wife. Therefore if Gussy chose—— Why should not this be——

But perhaps he was just as glad that he had not been allowed a possibility of committing himself. It was not his fault; he would have done it had he been alone with her, or even had he been able to get her to himself in a corner of the drawing-room, apart from immediate observation. But that had been impossible; and consequently it was Providence, not Edgar, which had kept it from coming to pass. Yet he was not sorry; he reflected philosophically that there was plenty of time. She was

not in love with him, he felt sure, any more than he was in love with her. She was not in any hurry. She was a dear, good, reasonable girl. In short, the more he thought of it, the more he came to see that (apart from romance, which was always absurd) nothing could be more appropriate in every way. They were made for each other. They were neither of them solemn, passionate people—they were both lively, cheerful, fond of a little movement and commotion, and yet fond of the country and of a reasonable life, with duty and responsibility in it. Gussy, alas! thought very little, had he but known it, of duty and responsibility; but this was how the matter shaped itself in Edgar's mind. Of course, there was no need for anything being decided in a hurry. Clare would probably marry first—or, if not, Clare's wishes must be supreme, whatever they were. She would live with them at Arden—she would still be mistress—no, that was perhaps impossible. At all events, she would still be—— Here Edgar found himself in deep waters and stuck fast, not quite making out how this was to be settled. Clare in Arden, and not mistress of Arden was impossible. No doubt, had his feelings been very deeply concerned, he would not have been deterred by such a thought—but as it was chiefly for other people's satisfaction that he was planning the arrangement,

it was a very serious drawback. What! please Gussy at the cost of Clare? This was the most grave obstacle to the plan which had yet come in his way.

He was still in this perplexity, and not without a consciousness of its whimsical character, when he received Clare's letter. There was something strained and strange in its expression which struck him curiously. Why should she write to him so? Of course she might ask anything of him—call him to her as she pleased. To make a journey from London to Lancashire was not much—a great deal farther, to the end of the world had she wished it, he would have gone willingly for his sister. He wrote her a little note, full of affectionate playful reproach. "Though I have a hundred things to do," he said; "though I am engaged to go to twenty balls, and ten dinners, and three concerts, and seventeen afternoon teas, in the course of the next four days, yet I will hurry through the most pressing of my engagements, and come home on Saturday." But the meaning of the letter was not in the least the thing that struck him—she wanted to consult him about something, that was all he made of it. And as for the manner of expression, Clare was in haste, or she was annoyed about something, or perhaps a little out of temper. Now and then Clare could be a little out of temper, he knew. Perhaps

the village people had been troublesome—perhaps it had vexed her that Arthur Arden should be staying with the Pimpernels. But, on the whole, haste was the most natural explanation. Thus he settled the matter with himself with very little difficulty; and on the whole he was very glad to be called home. And then it occurred to him all at once that the Thornleighs were going on Monday—and then——

Surely, and beyond all question, fate must have decided this matter for him. His summons had come to him at such a moment and in such a way that he *must* be supposed to be following the Thornleighs home, as he had been supposed to follow them to town. He could not but laugh as he perceived this new complication. Now, indeed, unless he took pains to show that he did mean something, there could be no doubt that it would be said Gussy was badly treated. When he went into the solemn shades of the Minerva to seek Lord Newmarch, with whom he had some business, he felt already sure what would be said to him. “Going home on Saturday!” said the politician; “what, before the education debate, which I so much wanted you to hear! Arden, I suppose it is clear enough to see what that means. But must you go because they go? Though you are not in Parliament, you have a duty to the public too——”

"I go because I am called home on business," said Edgar, "for no other reason, I assure you. I have heard from Clare to-day——"

"Oh, ah," said Lord Newmarch; "of course, we all understand urgent private affairs. But, Arden, though it does not become me to speak, I wish you had not meant to marry immediately. I should be more happy to congratulate you as member for East Lancashire than as Benedict the married man."

"The chances are you will never congratulate me as either," said Edgar, with a certain wayward pathos which puzzled himself; "I am not going to marry, and I don't intend to go into Parliament. I should not be much credit to you in that way; I should go in for impracticable measures, and call a spade a spade. Let me tame down first, and get used to parliamentary language and all the other fictions of life——"

"My dear fellow, I wish you were not so bitter about the fictions of life," said Lord Newmarch, shaking his head.

"Bitter!" said Edgar, with a laugh.

"Well, if not bitter, cynical—cynical—perhaps that is a better word. I have been thinking a great deal about what you said the other day, and I don't think there is much in it. Society must be kept up—some sacrifice must be made to keep up that

fine atmosphere—that air so sensitive to everything that comes into it—that brilliant, witty, refined——

“Newmarch,” said another young man, lounging up, “where were you that one couldn’t see you at the Strathfeldsays’ dance the other night? Awful bore! Never was at anything much worse all my life—the women all frights and the men all notabilities. Ah, Arden, I never see you anywhere now. Where has the t’other Arden gone—Arthur Arden—that one used to meet about? He used to be always with the Lowestofts. Lowestoft wouldn’t stand it at the last. Deuced bore! Some men are insufferable in that way. Pull you up short, whether you mean anything or not, and spoil the whole affair. Been doing anything in the House?—Education Bill, and that sort of thing. Hang education! What is the good of it? What has it ever done for you or me?”

“What, indeed!” cried Edgar—a backing which was received with the warmth it merited.

“Eton and Christchurch are reckoned pretty well,” said their new companion; “but I don’t know what they ever did for me. And as for those confounded fellows that never wash and have votes, what do they want with it? Depend upon it, they are a great deal better without. Teaches them to be discontented; then teaches you to humbug and

tell lies for them to read in the newspapers. By the way, where are you going to-night? I've got some men coming to dine with me. Will you make one—or, rather, will you make two, if Arden likes? Then there is that deuced affair on at the Bodmillers' which I suppose I shall have to look in upon; and the Chromatics are giving a grand concert, with Squallini and Whiskerando. Little Squallini is worth listening to, I can tell you. There are heaps of things I never attempt, and one is, going to musical nights promiscuous, not knowing what you're to hear. But the Chromatics know what is what. Going? I shall look out somebody, and have a rubber till five. These concerts and things are a confounded bore."

"Is that your brilliant, witty, refined—is that the sort of thing we should make a sacrifice to keep up?" said Edgar, as they went out together. "What an amount of trouble it has taken to produce him! And now he has to be kept up at a sacrifice. I should prefer to make a sacrifice to get rid of him, Newmarch. He is not so witty as his own groom, nor half so useful as that crossing sweeper——"

"You would find the crossing-sweeper dull, too, if you met him every day," said Newmarch. "The fact is, it is not a very good world, but it is the

best we can get; and if a man does as much as he can with it—— You must get into the House, Arden. I don't mean to say society is enough for an energetic man, with a great deal of time on his hands: but my occupations I hope are solid enough. I have had three or four hours of committees already; and I am going down to Westminster straight. Of course, it is pleasant to sit over that little table in the corner of the Thornleighs' drawing-room. Ah!—that sort of thing is not for me," said the legislator, with a sigh.

And Edgar laughed—partly at his friend, partly at himself, partly at the universal vanity. Lord Newmarch was no Solomon. The country could have gone on all the same had he, too, gossiped over a tea-table as so many of the youth of England were doing at that moment with relish as great as though they had been so many washerwomen, and tongues sharpened at the clubs. England would not have suffered had Lord Newmarch gossiped too. And Edgar was not much more genuine as he walked with him as far as Berkeley Square, and then dropped off "to say good-bye to the Thornleighs," leaving the liveliest certainty on Lord Newmarch's mind as to what were his relations with the family. Nor, perhaps, was Gussy more true, as she sat and filled out the tea, and saw,

with a little thrill, the man coming in who was to fix her fate. She did not love him any more than he loved her, and yet, in all likelihood, her life was in his hands. What a strange, aimless whirl it was in which everybody moved, or seemed to move, as some blind fate required, and could not stop themselves, nor change the current which kept drifting them on! The crossing-sweeper was the braver and the more genuine personage. The mud cleared away before his broom; the road grew passable where he moved; he had it in his power to make a new passage wherever he was so minded. At least, so one supposed looking at his mystery from outside. Perhaps within, the guild of crossing-sweepers has its tyrannical limitations too.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was a quiet hour when Edgar made his appearance in the drawing-room at Berkeley Square. Why this afternoon should have been so still and domestic and the last so noisy and full of visitors, it is difficult to say. The girls had been riding in the Park in the morning, "their last ride," as the younger ones informed him, with voluble regret. The horses were going off that evening; the whole house was, as it were, breaking to pieces. Already half the pretty things—the stands of books and vases of flowers—had disappeared from the tables. The girls looked somehow as if their very dresses were plainer, which was not actually the case. The cloud upon them was only a moral cloud, consequent upon the knowledge that on Monday they were all going home.

"And fancy, the opera will go on all the same, and Patti will sing, though we are away," said Mary, who was musical.

"There will be just as many dances every night,

and all night long, and we at Thorne!" cried Beatrice. Gussy, who looked down upon them both from the altitude of two and twenty, shook her head with a certain grandeur of superior experience.

"Oh, you silly girls! if you had seen as much of it as I have! The opera is all very well, and so are the dances; but you don't know how tiresome they get when you go on and on. Yes; it is my fourth season, Mr. Arden, and I think I have a right to be tired."

Lady Augusta gave her daughter a warning look. "The more seasons you can count the less disposed you will be to speak so very frankly of them," she said; "but Mr. Arden has been too much with us not to know what a chatterbox you are."

"Yes," said Edgar; "how good it has been of you to let me be so much with you. It has made town so much more pleasant to me than it could have been otherwise; and now I have come to bid you good-bye, though I am glad to think it will not be for long."

"To bid us good-bye!" they all cried, with surprise. And Lady Augusta cast another significant glance over the heads of Mary and Beatrice, who were too heedless to take any notice, at the daughter whose interests were more specially concerned.

"Yes," said Edgar; "Clare has written begging me to go to her directly. I am going on Saturday. I had no idea of it when I saw you yesterday; and after all I shall be in Lancashire before you are. I don't even know why it is I am sent for by my sovereign Clare."

Once more a look passed between Lady Augusta and her elder girls. They did not believe one word of this story. They took it quite simply for granted that he was doing this to be near them, to be within reach of Gussy. Gussy herself even was convinced. She had doubted and shaken her head when the entire household had been persuaded of the fact. But now a little flush of gratification lighted up her cheeks. She could no longer resist the conviction that his coming and going depended somehow, as she said modestly to herself, on "us."

"It is strange of Clare to send you such a summons," said Lady Augusta; "but I daresay she is very lonely, poor child. I do hope we shall see a great deal more of her at Thorne when we get home. To tell the truth, I am very glad you are going. I do not like to think of her, still in mourning as she is, and left in that house all alone."

"Yes; I have been a little forgetful of Clare, I fear," Edgar said, without thought; and the girls, who were now very attentive, made another rapid

comment within themselves all in a breath. He has been thinking so much of Gussy! How funny it was! How nice to be Gussy, for whose sake a man "forgot all about" his duties! A little thrill of interest ran through the assembled family; and even kind Lady Augusta, who had become, as she herself said, "quite attached" to Edgar, was a little moved by the thought of what might be coming.

"You are never forgetful of anybody, I am sure," she said, "unless with a very strong motive. I don't like to praise people to their faces; but I never saw any one less apt to think of himself than you."

Edgar made no reply to this praise. There was a little pause of expectation, an occasional hush in the room, which one and another attempted to break by snatches of conversation, perpetually interrupted. They can't expect me to make the plunge before them all, Edgar mused to himself, with a sense of fun which was very inappropriate to the gravity of the position. And after all, when he came to think of it, it would be very difficult to make this plunge. What could he say? Gussy and he had been upon the easiest, the friendliest terms. He did not see how he could alter that ground all at once, and assume a vein of high sentiment. There was in reality so little sentiment in his mind. He was not

impassioned ; and it occurred to him all at once that to ask a girl to marry him in this perfectly calm and humdrum way would not be flattering to the girl. Gussy, no doubt, would expect something very different. She would expect a lover's fervour, the excitement of a man whose happiness for life depended on her Yea or Nay ; and Edgar felt that his happiness did not depend upon it. Altogether, it was an embarrassing position. Conversation languished in the Thornleigh drawing-room, and the family gave furtive glances at him, and tried to look indifferent, and betrayed itself. As for Gussy, she never looked at him at all. She had given up her tea-making, though she still sat at the table, with the tray before her, which was a fortunate shield ; but her eyes were bent upon her work, and she was as silent as a mouse in her corner, conscious to her finger-points, and expectant too.

It was a relief when old Lady Vere came in, and her daughters, who were much of the same age as Mary and Beatrice, and instantly drew off the attention of those two sharp-eyed young women. Lady Vere, too, kept Lady Augusta in occupation, and had something to say to Helena. So that when Edgar brought her cup back to the tea-table, it was quite natural that he should glide into the vacant chair, and keep Gussy company. "Are you sorry

to leave town?" he said; and Gussy gave a shy, blushing, trustful glance into his face, which made him draw his chair a little closer. He *was* fond of her! not impassioned, but yet—what a dear little girl she was!

"Sorry for some things," Gussy said, "but not so sorry as Mary and Beatrice are. One's first season is always delightful; one feels as if it would all last for ever."

"Do you? I think I have that feeling too, but only because it is so dreary, so flat, so *banal*, always the same thing over again," said Edgar. "I think life must be waiting for us—real life, not this dull routine—at home."

"Yes, perhaps," said Gussy faintly—for every word he said seemed to be more and more weighted with meaning. He did not say absolutely, "the real life I speak of is our life together, the existence in which we two shall be one," but could anything be more clear than that he meant it so? Her voice sank in spite of herself. Gussy was not in the least impassioned either, but what she thought was—"How dearly he must love me, to be able to give up town and everything for my sake! Poor dear boy, that is all he is thinking of; and oh, I am not so good as he is. I am thinking of a great many other things besides him."

Thus, with the very best motives in the world, they went on deceiving each other. Not much was said over the tea-table except such broken scraps of talk as this—talk which meant next to nothing, and yet was supposed by the listeners on both sides to mean a great deal. “Ada is anxious to get back to her schools and her poor people,” Gussy said. “She is so good! She has done nothing but work for the children even here. People ought to be happy, don’t you think, that give themselves up like that, and think only of others? They must get to be happy because they are so good.”

“I hope so,” said Edgar, with a certain doubtfulness; “but, above all, those who are more happy should be good to her. One like her seems a sacrifice for others, securing their happiness. I mean——”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” said Gussy, clasping her hands; “and indeed it is no trouble to be good to Ada; we all love her so. Sometimes I feel as if it would be wicked to be very happy while she sits there——”

And they both turned to look at the sister who sat cheerful in the corner making little frocks. She was laughing at the moment, showing one of the Miss Veres how to shape a little sleeve. Gussy, who believed herself to stand on the very threshold

of so different a world, felt her heart overflow with love and compassion. "Dear Ada," she said to herself; only schools and poor children's frocks for Ada, while she herself was to have every delight. Edgar's feelings were different. If circumstances were so to arrange themselves as that he should be Ada's brother, he would be very good to her. She would find in him a friend who would never alter, who would stand by her steadily, doing all that brother could do to make her lonely path more easy. Involuntarily there rose before Edgar the vision of an after-life, with new interests in it and new duties; a new race of Ardens curiously different from the old, a warm household place for Ada and for everybody, a centre of domestic kindness. That was what the house of a country gentleman, the natural head of a community, ought to be. He smiled over the imagination, and yet it came naturally and pleasantly to his mind. Gussy, who was not more than a pretty girl now, would be the sweetest, kindest, most charming matron—like her own mother, but younger, and prettier, and more sweet; and the house would be full of pleasant tumult and society. He did not quite clearly identify himself, but that was, perhaps, because of the laugh that gradually broadened in his eyes at the thought. And to think that this arose simply

out of Ada's face in the corner, and the impulse of making life brighter for her! Then he roused up, and saw that Gussy was looking the same way, and that her pretty eyes were full of tears. How sweet, and good, and tender-hearted she was! They were women whom a man could trust his honour and happiness to without a doubt or fear. Never surely was there a stranger wooing. When their eyes met, Gussy blushed, and so did Edgar. Had they both been seeing in a vision the house that was not yet, the unborn faces, the unlighted fire? But then more visitors came in, and more tea was wanted, and nothing decisive could be said then and there. "I suppose you are going to the Lowestofts' to-night," Lady Augusta said, as he took leave of her; for she, too, saw clearly that nothing could possibly be settled in the drawing-room, under the eyes of all the family. "So it need not be good-bye yet. Of course we shall see you there."

And thus everything drew on towards the evident termination. If Edgar had been consulted on the subject before hand, he would have said that to enact his love drama, or at least its decisive scene, at a ball, would have been the very last thing in the world he was likely to do—just as it would have seemed absolutely impossible to him, had he

foreseen it, to forestall love in the way which he was doing, and put affection in its place. But he did not seem to have any will of his own at all in the matter. He was pleasantly drawn on by a tide which carried him towards Gussy, which made her inevitable, and his position unmistakeable. Not only was it expected of him, but he expected himself to take this step. The only thing he was doubtful of was how to do it. He could not possibly say to a girl so charming and worthy of all homage that he was very fond of her, and yet did not love her in the least as a lover should. If he did, it would be an insult, not such a lovesuit as could be accepted. Therefore, he would be obliged to put aside his true feeling, and produce an utterly false one, out of compliment to her; and how was he to do it? All the rest he could do willingly, pleasantly, with perfect consent of his mind and affections; but how was he to be false to her, to pretend to feelings which were not his? This occupied his mind all the rest of the afternoon, and gave him the greatest possible trouble. And at the same time it was evident that the crisis had come, and that he must speak. He sent her a bouquet as the first step, which was very easy and pleasant. If it had been diamonds and rubies instead of flowers, he would have done it with still greater

goodwill. He would give her anything, everything—Arden itself, and his liberty and his life; but how was he to get himself up to a lover's pitch of excitement, and offer her his heart?

CHAPTER XXV.

THE Lowestofts' ball was a very nice ball, everybody said. There were a great many people there. Indeed, everybody was there: the stairs were crowded and all the passages, and the dancers had scarcely room to move. To make your way up or down was almost as bad as going to Court. The way in which trains were damaged and trimmings torn off would have tried the temper of a saint. Nevertheless, the ladies bore it like heroines, smiling blandly, and protesting that it did not matter, even at the moment when their most cherished lace was being rent under their eyes. The mistress of the house stood at the top of the stairs, ready to drop with exhaustion, but grinning horribly a ghastly smile at everybody who approached her. A Royal Duke had come in for half-an-hour, and a German Prince, whom all the Lowestofts and all their friends treated with supreme contempt when they spoke of him; but yet, *vis-a-vis* of the *Morning Post*, were too proud and happy to see at their ball. Edgar Arden was one

of those who traversed the crowd with the least *ennui*; but he could not refrain from making those remarks upon it which he was in the habit of making concerning the natural history and habits of the world of fashion. Edgar remarked that only a very few people looked really happy; and these were either the men and women who had some special love affair, innocent or otherwise, on hand, and had been able to appropriate the individual who interested them with that safety which belongs to a crowd; or else those upward climbers seeking advancement, to whom every new invitation into "the best society" was an object of as much elation as a successful battle. These two classes of persons rejoiced with a troubled joy; but the rest of the guests were either indifferent, or bored, or discontented. They had come because everybody was coming; they had come because they were invited; and it was part of the routine of life to go. Rage was boiling in their souls over their torn lace; or, with a sigh from the bottom of their hearts, they were dreaming of their favourite chair at the club, and all its delights. They said the same things over and over to the same people, whom, probably in the morning in the Row, or in the afternoon at half-a-dozen places, they had met and said the same things to before. Edgar stood for a long time half-

way down the stair, and helped the ladies who were pushing their way up. He was waiting for Lady Augusta and her party, who were very late. He was waiting without any excitement, but with a little alarm, wondering if he could say anything to Gussy in the midst of such a crowd, or if still a breathing-time would be given to him. He did not want to elude that moment, but only it was so difficult to do it, so hard to know what to say. "That young Mr. Arden is very nice. I don't think I should ever have got upstairs without him," said more than one substantial chaperon. "He is waiting for the Thornleighs," the daughters would say. Everybody had decided Edgar's fate for him. Some people said it had been all settled before they came up from the country. And there could not be the least doubt that, if Edgar had let the season pass without saying anything to Gussy, he would have been concluded by everybody to have used her very ill.

And a great many speculations passed through Edgar's mind as he stood there and waited. Sometimes he witnessed such a meeting as ought to have been in store for himself. He saw the youth and maiden meet who were to get to the real climax in their romance by means of the Lowestofts' ball; and wondered within himself whether the outside world

could see the same glow in his eyes which he could see in those of the other lover, or whether the same delightful atmosphere of consciousness enveloped Gussy as that which seemed to enclose the other girl in a rosy cloud. And he saw other pairs meet, not of youths and maidens ; he saw gleams of strange fire which did not warm but burn ; he saw the vacant looks of the mass, the factitious flutter of delight with which the dull crowd recognised its acquaintances. Lord Newmarch came up to him when he had occupied this perch for some time. "What are you doing here, of all places in the world ? Are you going or coming ? Oh, I see ; you are waiting for the Thornleighs," he said ; "they are generally in good time for a ball——"

"I am waiting because it is amusing here," said Edgar, careful even now that Gussy at least should not be discussed.

"Amusing !—the amusement must be in you, so I will stay by you," said Lord Newmarch ; "probably some of it may come my way. What an odd fellow you are, to expect to be amused wherever you go, like a bumpkin at a fair ! By the way, that reminds me, Arden, the people have a faculty for being amused which is wonderful ; they are ready for it at all times and seasons, you know, not like us. It is a faculty which ought to be made

use of for their improvement. I don't see why they shouldn't be educated in spite of themselves. The drama, for instance ; now the drama has lost its hold on *us*—to us the play is a bore. We go to the opera to see each other, not to hear anything. But the people are all agog for anything in the shape of a play. What do you think ? If the stage has any vigour left in it, instead of getting up sensation dramas for cads and shopkeepers——”

“But cads and shopkeepers are part of the people,” said Edgar.

“No ; that is not what I mean ; I mean the real lower classes—the working men—our masters that are to be. How could they learn patriotism, not to say good sense, better than by means of Shakespeare ? Poetry of the highest class is adapted to every capacity. What is secondary may have to be explained and broken down, but the highest——”

“I think I must ask you to let me pass,” said Edgar, seeing the shadow of Lady Augusta's nose (which was prominent) on the wall close to the door. She was bringing in her daughters against a stream which was flowing out, and the struggle was very difficult, and demanded the greatest care.

“Oh, I suppose I am not wanted any longer,” said Newmarch ; “but, Arden, look here, I hope you mean to let me go to you for a day or two in

September—eh? not for the partridges. Wait one moment. I should be glad of a quiet opportunity to speak to you by yourself——”

“Another time,” said Edgar, extricating himself as best he could from the crowd.

“Wait one moment! I am free from the 20th of August. I will go to you as soon as you like—you know why I ask. Arden, remember I count upon your good offices—and then if my influence can be of any use to you——”

“Yes, precisely,” said Edgar, swinging himself free. Lord Newmarch looked after him with a little metaphorical lifting up of hands and eyes, How simple the boy must be!—falling a hopeless victim to Gussy Thornleigh, his next door neighbour, when he had, so to speak, all England to choose from; for the suit of Arden of Arden was not one which was likely to fail, unless he fixed his fancy very high indeed. Lord Newmarch could not but reflect that in some things Arden had very greatly the advantage even of himself—there were so many people still who had a prejudice in favour of grandfathers, and his own grandfather, though the first Earl, could not, he was aware, bear discussing. Gussy Thornleigh, he reflected, was a very fortunate woman. She would have nothing, or next to nothing. Her sister Helena was one who, under

more favourable circumstances, would have attracted Lord Newmarch himself; but he could not afford to throw himself away upon a girl who had nothing, and whose connections even were not of a kind to bring advancement. Nothing could be better than her family, no doubt; but then she had a quantity of brothers who would have to be pushed on in the world, and no doubt the sisters' husbands would be called upon for aid and influence. Arden was the very sort of man to suffer himself to be so called on. He would be ready to help them and to get them out of all their scrapes. It was he who would be looked to when anything was the matter. In short, he was just the kind of man to marry a girl who was one of a large family. Lord Newmarch reflected that he himself was not so. He wanted all his influence, all his money, everything his position gave him, for himself or, at least, for his brothers. He even paused to ask himself whether, in case he should marry Clare Arden, he might not be appealed to as a connexion of the family for appointments, &c., for some of those Thornleigh boys. But Clare, he reflected, was not a good-natured fool like Edgar. She was one who knew what was due to a man's position, and that there were few who had anything to spare. Accordingly, he felt easy in his mind respecting that very far off danger. It was Clare

who was the proper match for himself; and with a little shrug of his shoulders Lord Newmarch watched Edgar make his way through the crowd to where Lady Augusta, caught in an eddy, with all her train of girls, was struggling to get in, against the almost irresistible force of the torrent going out. Certainly, to come up to town for the purpose of making love to your next neighbour in the country was a waste of means indeed.

Meanwhile, Lady Augusta had seized on Edgar's arm with a sense of relief which made her heart glow with grateful warmth. It was another evidence of what a good son he would be, what a help in need. "I am so thankful to see you," she cried. "We are a little late, I know; but I never dreamt that people would be going so soon. There is a great ball in Eaton Square, I believe, to-night, given by some of those odious *nouveaux riches*; that is where everybody is flocking to." This was said loud enough to catch the ear of the crowd which was going out, and which had whirled Lady Augusta with it, and disordered the sweep of her train. She held Edgar fast while she made her way upstairs. She could not have done it without him, she said, and mourned audibly over her unfriended condition in the ear of her future son-in-law. "Harry promised to be looking out for us," she

said ; "but I suppose he is dancing, or something else that amuses him ; and Mr. Thornleigh is never any use to us socially. He is always at the House."

"Does he go down to Thorne with you ?" asked Edgar, meaning nothing in particular ; but at present every word he spoke was marked and noted. No doubt, he wanted to make sure of being able to communicate with Gussy's father at once.

"No, he stays in town," said Lady Augusta, "for a few weeks longer ;" and then she added, with an attempt at carelessness, "I am the family business-man, Mr. Arden. We have always one mind about the children and their concerns. He says it saves him so much trouble, and that without my help he could never do anything. It is pleasant when one's husband thinks so, who, of course, knows one's weaknesses best of all. Oh, what a business it is getting upstairs ! Gussy, keep close to me, darling. Ada, I hope you are not feeling faint. Dear, dear, surely there must be bad management somewhere ! I think I never saw such a crush in a private house."

Lady Lowestoft was nearer the top of the stair than usual, and took this criticism, which she had overheard, for a compliment. "A great number of our friends have been so good as to come to us," she said. "Dear Lady Augusta, how late you are ! I

fear the dear girls will scarcely get any dancing before supper. Did you meet the Duke as you came in? He is looking so well. It was very kind of him to come so early. I really must scold you for being a little late."

"What a fool that woman is," Lady Augusta whispered in Edgar's ear. "She very nearly compromised herself last season with your cousin Arthur Arden. He was never out of the house. A man without a penny, and whose character is so thoroughly well known! And then for one of those silly women who are really silly, a hundred other women get the blame of it, which is very hard, I think. Helena is always talking of such things, and it makes one think."

Thus Edgar was appropriated for a long time, until he had found a seat for Lady Augusta, and had placed Ada (who did not dance) by her side. When he had time to disengage himself, he saw both Gussy and Helena whirling about among the dancers; for they were popular girls, and always had partners. Thus the whole evening went past, and he found no opportunity for any explanation. Had he been able to monopolise Gussy's attention, and lead her away to a moderately-quiet corner, no doubt he would have delivered himself of what he had to say. But then it was not so very urgent.

Had it been very urgent, of course he could have found the ways and means. He had one dance with her, but nothing could be said then; and though he proposed a walk into the conservatory, fate, in the shape of another partner, who carried her off triumphantly, interposed. And what could a man do more? He had been perfectly willing to make the full plunge, and in the meantime he watched over the whole family as if he had been their brother, and put Lady Augusta into her carriage afterwards, never really leaving them all the evening. If this was not to *afficher* himself, it would be hard to tell what more he could do. He held Gussy's hand after he put her in, and said something about calling next day. "Don't, please," Gussy had whispered hurriedly; "come when we are at Thorne. I know we shall all be at sixes and sevens to-morrow, and no time to talk." She, too, understood now quite calmly and frankly that this next visit must be more important than an afternoon call, and he pressed her hand as he whispered good-bye, feeling disposed to say to her, "What a dear, kind, reasonable girl you are; how well we shall understand each other, even though——" But he did not say this, more especially the "even though——" And he stood on the pavement and watched them drive away with a sensation of relief. He had quite made

up his mind by this time, and did not intend to defer the crisis a moment longer than was necessary ; but still, on the whole, he was pleased to feel that, whatever might happen afterwards, he was going back to Arden a free man.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"COME into my dressing-room before you go to bed," Lady Augusta whispered in her daughter's ear. The sisters were in the habit of holding their own private assemblies at that confidential moment, and the three elder ones were just preparing for a consultation in Ada's room when Gussy received this summons. Of course she obeyed it dutifully, with her pretty hair hanging about her shoulders, in a pretty white dressing-gown, all gay with ribbons and embroidery. "I know mamma is going to ask me ever so many questions, and I have nothing to tell her," she said, pouting, as she left Ada and Helena. But Lady Augusta was very gentle in her questioning. "I think your hair is thicker than it used to be, my darling," she said, taking the golden locks in her hand with fond admiration. "Don't *crêper* more than you can elp, f or I always think it spoils the hair. Yours is more like what mine used to be than any of the others, Gussy. Helena's is like your papa's; but

my hair used to be just your colour. Alas! it has fallen off sadly now."

"Your hair is a great deal prettier than mine," said Gussy, putting her caressing arm round her mother's neck. "I like that silver shade upon it. Hair gets so sweet when it gets grey—one loves it so. If you had not thought so much about us all, mamma dear, and had so many worries, you would not have had a white thread. I know it is all for us."

"Hush! my dear," said Lady Augusta; "you are all very good children. I have not had half so many worries as most people. It is in the family. The Hightons all grow grey early. You were looking very nice to-night. That blue becomes you; I always like you best in blue. Did you dance with Edgar Arden more than once, Gussy? I could not quite make out——"

"Only once, mamma."

"How was that? He was waiting for us to come in. I suppose you were engaged to half-a-dozen people before you got there. I don't like you to do that. If they don't come for you at the proper moment you are kept from dancing altogether, and look as if you were neglected; and if they do come, probably somebody else has made his appearance whom you would like better. I

don't approve of engaging yourself so long in advance."

"But one goes to dance," said Gussy, with humility; "and to tell the truth, mamma, Mr. Arden likes looking after you quite as much as dancing with me. He likes to see that you are comfortable, and have some one pleasant to talk to, and don't want for anything. And I like him for it!" the girl cried, fervently. "He is of more use to you than Harry is. I like him because he is so fond of you."

"Nonsense, dear!" said Lady Augusta, with a pleased smile. "He is good to me on your account. And you must not say anything against Harry. Harry is always a dear boy; but he has a number of friends, and he knows I don't expect him to give up his own pleasure. Yes; Edgar Arden is very nice; I don't deny I am getting quite fond of him. Did he—had you any particular conversation with him, my darling, to-night?"

"No, mamma," said Gussy, with her eyes cast down, and a rising colour on her cheeks.

"Or perhaps he is coming to-morrow? Did he say anything about coming to-morrow?" said Lady Augusta, with a little anxiety in her tone.

"He asked me if he might, but I said no. I thought we would be in such confusion—every-

thing packing up, and all our shopping to do, and so much bother—and then probably when he came nobody at home. And you know, mamma, we shall meet again so soon—next week,” said Gussy, apologetically. As she spoke she began to feel that perhaps that little bit of maidenly reluctance had been a mistake; and Lady Augusta shook her head.

“My dear, I don’t think putting off is ever good,” she said. “When you have lived as long as I have you will know upon what nothings the greatest changes may turn. If he had come to-morrow, one needed no ghost to tell us what would have happened—but next week is a different thing, and the country is a different thing from town. There are seven miles between Arden and Thorne—there is Clare at the other end to hold him back—there are a thousand things; whereas, the present moment, you know—there is nothing like the present moment in all such affairs.”

“If he cared so little for me,” cried Gussy, indignant, “as to be kept back by seven miles—or even by Clare——”

“My dear, that is not the question,” said her mother. “He has been with us here every day, but he can’t ride over to Thorne every day. He will find business waiting for him, and his visitors will begin to come, and Clare—without meaning

any harm—I am sure Clare would never put herself in opposition to you; she is a great deal too proud for that—but without meaning it she will make engagements for him, she will expect him to attend to her a little—and it is quite natural she should. I am very sorry you did not let him come. For my own part I should have liked to see him again. I am growing quite fond of him, Gussy. He is the sort of young man whom one can put such confidence in. I should have liked to ask his advice about Phil at Harrow. I should have liked—but of course it cannot be helped now. I think I will ask them both to come and spend a week with us at Thorne.”

“Mamma!” cried Gussy, with a violent blush. “Oh, don’t please; fancy inviting a man—any man—for the express purpose—— Oh, please, for my sake, don’t do such a thing as that!”

“Such a thing as what?” asked Lady Augusta, gravely. “Because you happen to have a little feeling on the subject, that is not to prevent me, I hope, from doing my duty to my nearest neighbours. Clare Arden has not paid us a visit since she went into mourning. And she really ought not to be encouraged to go on wearing black and shutting herself up in this absurd way. I will write and invite them to-morrow. Don’t you see,

autumn is approaching, and of course he has asked quantities of people—young men always do the first season, when they feel they have a house all to themselves. No, my dear, don't say anything. I know more of the world than you do, and I know there is nothing so perilous as letting such a thing drag on. He had better either ask you at once, or make it quite plain that he is not going to ask you; and much as I like him, Gussy, if this is not decided directly I shall certainly not invite him any more."

"Mamma, you make me so ashamed of myself," said Gussy. "If you ask him to Thorne for such a purpose I know I shall not be able to look at him. I will not be civil to him—I could not—so it will do more harm than good."

"I am not afraid that you will be uncivil," said Lady Augusta, with a smile; "but it was very foolish of you to say he was not to come. I can't think how you could do it. Sometimes, it is true, it is better for a man not to think he is too distinctly understood. Sometimes—— But never mind, my dear, I see it is I who must manage matters now. Go and put up your hair, and go to bed——"

"But, oh, mamma, dear!" cried Gussy, with her arms round her mother's neck. "Don't! How

could I ever speak to him when I knew—— How could I ever look him in the face?"

"I hope you know how to conduct yourself towards all your papa's guests," said Lady Augusta, with dignity. "If you don't, I should feel that I must have brought you up very badly. I hear your papa's step coming along the corridor. Good night, my darling! Go to bed, and don't think any more of it; and be sure you don't let Angelique *crêper* your hair."

Thus dismissed, Gussy sped along the passage, and rushed in, breathless and indignant, yet not so indignant as she looked, into Ada's room, where her sisters were waiting for her. "Only fancy!" she cried, throwing herself into the nearest chair. "Only think what mamma is going to do! Because I would not let him come here to-morrow, when we will all be in such confusion, she is going to write and ask the Ardens to Thorne! I shall never be able to look him in the face. I shall feel he knows exactly what is meant—— Oh! to think a man should be able to suppose one expects—— He will think it is my doing—he will imagine I want him. Oh, Ada! what shall I do——"

"Hush, dear, hush!" said Ada, who was the consoler of the house; while Helena, in her *rôle* of indignant womanhood, took up Gussy's strain.

"He will think women are all exactly the same—that is what he will think—ready to compass sea and land for the sake of a settlement," cried Helena. If you loved him it would not be so bad—or if he thought you loved him; but it is for the settlement—it is because your trade is to get married. Don't you see, now, the justice of all I have been saying? If you could learn a profession like a man, men would never dare to think so. But the worst is, it is true. All that mamma thinks of is to get you settled at Arden—all she thinks of is to get you provided for—all she cares——"

"Helena!" cried Gussy, with a burst of tears. "I won't hear you say a single word against mamma."

"Hush—hush, both of you children!" said gentle Ada. "Nell, you must not storm; and, Gussy dear, I can't bear you to cry. What mamma does always comes out right. It may not be just what one could desire, nor what one would do one's self. But it always turns out better than one expects. Of course, she wants to see you provided for—isn't it her duty? She wants you to be happy and well off, and have the good of your life as she has. Nobody can say mamma has not done her duty. Sometimes it seems a little hard to others, but we all know——"

"Oh, you dear Ada!" cried both her sisters, taking the comforter between them, and weeping over her. But she, who was the martyr of the family, did not weep. She gave them a kiss, first one and then the other, and smiled at their girlish ready tears.

"I have never said very much about it," she said; "but I think I know Edgar Arden. He will not think anything disagreeable about mamma's invitation, if she sends it. He is not that kind of man; he is not always finding people out, like some of Harry's friends. He would not do anything that is nasty himself; and he would never suspect anybody else. It would not come into his head. And then he is fond of mamma and all of us. I am quite sure, as sure as if I had put it to the proof, that he would do anything for *me* if I were to ask him—not to speak of Gussy. And if that is really what he means——"

"I don't think you think it is," said Gussy, with a little flush of pride. "I am sure you don't think it is! Don't be afraid to speak quite plainly. You don't suppose I care——"

"But I do suppose you care," said Ada, giving her sister another sympathetic kiss. "We all care. I am fond of him, too. I should like to be quite sure he was to be my brother, Gussy——"

and I should like, for his sake, to make sure that you too——”

“Oh, it does not matter what a girl feels,” said Gussy, pettishly, waving her pretty hair about her face, and concealing her looks behind it. “We have to marry somebody—and then there are so many of us. Mamma says I am not to *crêper* my hair; but if I don’t, how can I ever make a show as everybody does? She would not like to see me different from other girls. Oh, me! I wish I was not a girl, obliged to take such trouble about how I look and what people will think; and obliged to wonder and bother and worry everybody about what some man is going to say next time I meet him. Oh, I cannot tell you how I hate men!”

“I don’t hate them,” said Helena. “Why should we? Treat them simply as your fellow-creatures. They have got to live in the world, and so have we. The only thing is that we need not try to make each other miserable. There is room enough for both of us. If they will only let me use my faculties, I will take care not to interfere with them. I am not afraid, for my part, to meet them upon equal terms——”

“Oh, I am so tired!” said Gussy. “I don’t want to meet any one on equal terms. I never want to see one of the wretched creatures again. I wish

somebody would shut them all up, and let us have a little peace. I wish somebody would come and do my hair. Nell, you have got nothing to vex you: if you do not mind a little trouble, please ring for Angelique——”

And then Gussy sat still with tolerable composure, and had her hair plaited up tight, and chattered about the Lowestofts' dance. Her mind, after all, was not seriously disturbed either by Edgar's silence or her mother's threatened invitation. Perhaps, indeed, on the whole, it would be rather pleasant than otherwise to have him at Thorne. He was so nice in a house; he was kind to everybody, always ready to make himself useful—a great deal more serviceable than Harry. And to be sure he had understood perfectly, and so had she, what would have been said if, amidst all the bother of packing, they had met to-morrow. It had not been spoken in words, but in everything else it was decided and settled. Gussy fell into silence after a while, and let the idea of him glide pleasantly, tenderly through her mind. He was not a man who would be like papa, absorbed in his estate, and his sessions, and his game. He would not be selfish, as Harry sometimes was. He could not help being thoughtful of other people, tender of everybody belonging to him. There had been

moments when Gussy had entertained a certain harmless envy of Clare's supremacy. But she envied her no longer—though Queen Gussy would be a different kind of ruler from Princess Clare.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHILE all these discussions were going on in Berkeley Square, Edgar was preparing in the most leisurely and easy-minded way for his return home. He had forgotten the urgency of Clare's letter, but he was glad to emancipate himself from the social treadmill which he did not understand, and set his face again towards the fair green country and his duties and his home. It seemed so rational a life in comparison that he had even a higher opinion of himself when he turned his back upon town and its amusements. Not for anything bad he had encountered there; the wickedness had not thrust itself upon him—his own temper and thoughts leaving him out of harmony with it; but the foolishness had struck him with double force. Wickedness itself is better than no meaning, at least it is less contemptible, less bewildering, more comprehensible. He was not only going home, but he was about to change the fashion of his life, to begin who could tell what alterations in every-

thing about him ; and a little gentle excitement was in his mind, not any impassioned sentiment, not any whirlwind of fear and hope. He could not even say to himself that the happiness of his life depended on Gussy's reply, or on the chance whether or not she would share the rest of his life with him. But still the thought of so sweet a companion moved him with a little thrill of pleasurable emotion. There was still the chance that he should meet them the next day, a chance which Lady Augusta did not take into consideration ; and as the shopping occupied the girls and withdrew them from the usual regions of society, the fact was that he did not meet them anywhere, and found the day hang very heavy on his hands in consequence. When he fell suddenly upon Ada late in the afternoon, returning accompanied by her maid from a visit to some "Sisters" with whom she was allied, Edgar brightened up instantly. He came to her side, and insisted on walking with her across the Park. She had very little to say, except at moments when her sympathy was in forcible requisition, and was not in the least an amusing companion. But he did his best to talk to her, and showed her clearly how glad he was to see her. "I was told I was not wanted at Berkeley Square to-day," he said, "which has been very doleful for

me. I shall ride over to Thorne on Tuesday and bid you welcome home." "I am sure mamma will be pleased to see you," said gentle Ada; and she, too, went home a little excited by the encounter. "He said he would ride over on Tuesday to bid us welcome," she repeated to Lady Augusta the moment she entered. "So, perhaps, mamma, you will not require to send that invitation which troubles Gussy so much. It is best when these things come of themselves." "So it is, my dear," said Lady Augusta. "I knew he was the nicest fellow! he shall stay to dinner if he comes." And so that matter was settled. Gussy even made up her mind what dress she would put on to meet him on that eventful afternoon, which probably would decide her fate. Her mother liked her best in blue, and so she decided did he, for had he not once said— So Gussy made a mental memorandum, and felt a warm little thrill of tender kindness at her heart for the man who loved her. Of course he loved her. She might have other inducements to marry him. The charm of Arden, the necessity of being provided for, the trade, as Helena called it, of getting married, would all weigh consciously or unconsciously with her. But with him there could be but one reason—love; and Gussy's heart swelled with that tender gratitude and kindness and half

pity with which a woman whose affections are quite free and disengaged often regards the man who has (as people say) fallen in love with her. Pity, she could not tell why, a soft half regret that she could not give him so much as he gave her. "Poor, dear boy!" she said to herself; and then shyly peeping, as it were, behind a veil, found out that she might love him too, could be very fond of him after—when—— And she caressed her blue dress with a smile and a little emotion, and looked that the ribbons were fresh that must be worn with it, before Angelique packed it away. "Mamma likes me in blue," she said with a conscious smile. Alas!—But nobody knew nor suspected how little the blue dress would be thought of, or how different the reality and the imagination would be!

Edgar went down next morning to his nearest railway station with an absolute absence of every exciting incident. The groom was waiting with his dogcart, the western sun threw a slanting line on the country, everything looked like home-coming and peace. "Is all right at the Hall?" he asked for mere custom's sake, as he took the reins. "Yes, sir, so far as I know, sir, but Mrs. Fillpot, she thinks there's something to do with Miss Arden," said the groom. "Something to do?" Edgar echoed, unfamiliar with the homely phrase. "Poorly, sir, she

thinks, does Mrs. Fillpot," said the man. A headache, I suppose, Edgar thought to himself, and drove on without alarm. How fresh the country was, how green the trees, how restful all those houses, the villagers at their doors, the village patriarchs working leisurely in their little gardens. Even the Red House as he passed it blinked and shone in the sunshine, offering him a certain welcome. Was Arthur Arden there still, he wondered, and how was his suit progressing, and what did Alice Pimpernel think of it? Had she said, "Oh yes, Mr. Arden," to his kinsman's wooing? All these things passed through Edgar's mind as he drove along with a smile upon his face, and the pleasant confidence of a man going home. He was glad to recognise the very trees, much more the familiar faces; glad to think of his sister's welcome which awaited him—full of natural satisfaction and content.

The first shadow that crossed him was at the corner of the road which led to the Red House. There he paused for a moment, hearing behind him a sudden rush and din upon the road, the sound as of horses that had run away. Then they appeared in sight, tearing onward, coming full speed towards him, making his own horse plunge and struggle between the shafts. Edgar flung the reins to his

groom, and jumped down instantly to see if he could be of use—but had not touched the ground when they rushed past him—Mr. Pimpernel's bays, a high-spirited, high-fed, excitable pair. The reins were flying loosely about their necks, the horses were half-mad with fright and agitation, and a succession of screams proved, if the gleam of feminine dress had not been enough to do so, that the light waggon had not its ordinary passengers, but was driven by a lady. It swept round the corner like a whirlwind, and Edgar with hopeless horror rushed after. As he did so, he perceived two figures running wildly across a field, in advance, to cut off their progress. It was Mr. Pimpernel and Arthur Arden. Edgar stopped, seeing how hopeless was an idea of being of use, and watched with breathless interest the course of the two men who might yet be in time. Then there was a plunge—a shriek—the appearance as of something falling, like the flight of a bird or an arrow, from the high seat to the ground. Edgar shut his eyes involuntarily with a movement of sympathetic pain. When he opened them again, the horses were standing trembling and panting, with the groom at their heads, who had appeared, he could not tell how or whence; and Mr. Pimpernel and Arthur Arden were standing each by a little particoloured heap on the roadside. A sud-

den wild fancy that Clare might have been one of the sufferers came into Edgar's mind, and he called to his man to follow him, and hastened up to the scene of the accident. When he reached it, he found Mr. Pimpernel, pale as death and trembling, lifting up his daughter, who had been thrown upon a mossy bank at the foot of the hedge. Alice was ghastly, with little streams of blood trickling down her forehead; but she was conscious, and not apparently severely injured. "It is nothing, papa; I am only scratched and shaken, that is all," she was saying, while her father, too much agitated to understand, dragged her up in his arms and overwhelmed her with incoherent questions. Edgar ran and brought her water from a pool close by, which was not of the clearest, and yet sufficed to wash the trickling drops off her forehead, and lessen her father's apprehensions. And then he produced his travelling flask of sherry, which revived her still more completely. It did not occur to him even that there was another sufferer, nor that his cousin whom he had seen a moment before was lending no assistance here. "See, I can stand—I am not hurt, papa; I am only shaken," Alice was repeating, till Edgar almost loved her for her pertinacity. The father was totally helpless and overcome. "My girl, my child!" he was repeating, with white

lips, drawing her into his arms. "I do not think she is hurt, sir," said Edgar, whose impressionable heart was touched. "Let us put her into my dog-cart, and my groom will drive her gently home." "Yes, yes, that is best," said Alice. "Papa, you hurt me; but, oh! I am not injured—I am only aching and shaken—and, oh, papa!——"

"What is it?" cried Edgar, seeing her anxious glance round.

"Jeanie!" The name sounded like a cry; and then, all at once, the whole party were aware of Arthur Arden making his way towards the nearest cottage with something in his arms. Even Mr. Pimpernel grew silent in his anxiety. Alice shivered violently, and fell back upon Edgar, who put out his arm to support her with a sudden spasm of pain and terror in his heart. No moan nor cry came from the thing in Arthur Arden's arms. Was it Jeanie who lay thus, in a heap, silent, undistinguishable? Alice shuddered more and more, and fell down on her knees, and began to cry; while old Pimpernel, in his excitement, rose and said—"If anything has happened to her, I will shoot those d—d horses, and that d—d fool. But for him, curse him, it would never have happened." Edgar felt as if he had been suddenly turned to stone. What was Jeanie to him that her peril should so move him?

It was the horror of it, done as it were before his eyes. And then her grandmother—— While Alice wept and her father stormed, Edgar felt his very heart grow sick. “Take her home,” he said peremptorily to Mr. Pimpernel, who, stilled in his excitement by any sudden voice of authority, humbly obeyed. Between them they lifted Alice, still weeping and moaning, into the dogcart, and slowly and steadily she was driven home to the Red House. Edgar drew a long breath of relief when she was gone; and then he turned with the silent speed of excitement after Arthur Arden to the cottage door.

There, there was nothing but excitement and commotion. One neighbour had gone already for Dr. Somers; another was carrying water to bring the sufferer to herself. One woman shook her head and said—“I saw her face, and it’s the face of death; she’ll never come round.” “Hold your tongue,” said another; “she’s as like life as you or me; she’ll come round fast enough if you’ll hold your noise and look after the children.” “Little the children’s din will hurt her,” said a third. Was Jeanie killed? All in a moment, the harmless, gentle little creature, had she been dashed into the unknown world? As this thought went through Edgar’s mind, he heard a little stir among the gossips—a silence, and rustle of all their dresses as they stood back in-

instinctively. "It is her grandmother," they said; and immediately after Mrs. Murray, very pale and steadfast, suddenly passed through the crowd. How Edgar's heart yearned over the old woman whom he knew so little of—who was nothing to him! Admiration, pity, something more deep than either, swept over him. This poor woman who had done so much, who had taken upon her so many burdens, was this the reward God was about to give for all her toils and trials?—her child snatched from her in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. The other was safe, who, herself and all belonging to her, had thought of nothing but their own pleasure and profit, all their lives. And it was this woman who had suffered and toiled, and spent her life for others, who was to open her breast again and receive the cruellest blow. Strange compensation, reward, and encouragement! Edgar attempted to enter two or three times, but was kept back by the crowd. "Lord bless you, sir, you can't do no good," they said to him. "There's one gentleman there already, and better they'd be without him." Somehow it was a kind of comfort to think that Arthur Arden was in the way, and of no use. It made even Edgar more patient as he stood without, waiting for his dogcart, and brooding over those strange imperfections of life. One taken, and the other left. But

why Jeanie—why the old mother's one comfort and consolation? When the dogcart arrived he sent it off in search of the doctor. He forgot all about Clare and her anxiety, and thought of nothing but the dead or dying girl.

After a while Arthur Arden came out, very pale, with a tremor and suppressed agitation that was pitiful to see. His mind was not even sufficiently disengaged to be surprised at this sudden appearance of his cousin. He put out his hand to Edgar unconsciously, with a certain appeal to his sympathy. "It was my fault," he said hoarsely. And thus the two stood, almost clinging together till the dogcart rattled past over the bit of causeway, bringing the doctor. Arthur put his arm within Edgar's in the excitement of the moment. "If she dies," he repeated hoarsely, with large drops standing on his forehead, "it will be my fault."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

How did it happen?—a question so easy to ask—recalling so often in the midst of the most tragic seriousness a moment of utter levity, gaiety, and carelessness—a light impulse for which never all his life long will some one forgive himself. “It was my fault,” Arthur Arden explained, with a voice choked and broken. “I had driven Miss Pimpernel to the station to meet her father, and we met and stopped to talk to Jeanie on the way. We talked to her, and offered her carelessly a drive when we came back. On the way back we found her still on the same spot. I got down to speak to her, and so did old Pimpernel—Heaven knows why! Then there was some talk about this drive. She did not understand us—she had no intention of coming. It was I who almost lifted her into the carriage. I had my foot on the step to mount after her, when Alice seized the reins, and dashed on. Don’t ask me any more. And now, God help us, that innocent creature is dying—and it is my fault——”

"It is more Miss Pimpernel's fault," said Edgar, but he turned from his kinsman with a dislike and sense of repulsion which he could hardly explain. Arthur, on the contrary, clung to him with painful anxiety. "Don't leave me until we hear," he cried. He kept his arm within Edgar's, holding him fast, feeling him to be a defence against the Pimpernels, against Mrs. Murray, against even the sour looks of Dr. Somers, when he should come. No doubt, Arthur felt, the whole world would blame him, and consider Jeanie as his victim. The Pimpernels would forsake him, and Clare—— "Arden," he said, with sudden weakness, "I have had a great deal to annoy me since you went away. These people, the Pimpernels, invited me after a while, and I stayed, thinking—I don't hesitate to say, for you know—thinking I should be near your sister. And Clare has behaved to me——"

"Hush, for Heaven's sake," said Edgar, angrily. "I will have nothing said of Clare. Let us see what comes of this business in the first place—it is enough for the moment."

"You blame me," said Arthur; "of course I knew you would blame me. But, as you have said yourself, it was that fool of a girl who was to blame. Good God! how could she drive these fiery brutes—I told her it was impossible. If it had only been

herself she had killed, and not poor Jeanie—little Jeanie.”

“For Heaven’s sake, be silent!” cried Edgar, furiously, trying to shake off the hand on his arm. Excitement and apprehension had produced upon Arthur the effect of wine. His nerves were so shaken that he almost wept as he repeated Jeanie’s name. Remorse, and anxiety, and pity, which were as much for himself as for any of the others, unmanned him altogether. He was deeply distressed for the girl whom his folly had helped to place in such jeopardy, but he was also distressed for himself, wondering and asking himself what he should do, how he should ever free himself from the consequences of such a misfortune. Clare was lost unless her brother interposed; and though he was innocent, surely, in respect to Alice Pimpernel, she was lost too, with her thirty thousand pounds. And Jeanie, poor little innocent victim, was probably dying. No gratification to himself or his vanity could be got out of further pursuit of her. This selfish compunction was but the undercurrent, it is true. Above that was a stream of genuine grief and distress for the suffering creature; but he had thought of himself too long to be able altogether to dismiss the consideration now.

Half the village had gathered about the door

when the dogcart which played so large a part in the scene dashed up again, bringing Dr. Somers. Of all houses in the world it was the cottage of Sally Timms, the one nearest the end of the village, into which Jeanie had been carried. Sally was as prompt and ready of resource as she was thriftless and untidy ; but the surrounding villagers did not respect her house sufficiently to keep out of it, or to keep silent. The Doctor dispersed them with a few sharp words. "Take those children away instantly, and keep the place quiet, or I'll bring Perfitt down upon you," he said emphatically. Perfitt's name did what Perfitt's master had not thought of doing. And Edgar immediately bestirred himself to second the Doctor. He partly coaxed, partly frightened the crowd away ; while Arthur stood gloomily leaning against the little garden gate chewing the cud of very bitter reflections. Then there was a long pause, a pause of intense expectation. The women who had been sent away watched from the corner and from their own doors for the reappearance of the Doctor. The children slunk away into distant groups, now and then seduced into a shout or gambol, which was instantly put a stop to by some indignant spectator. The very birds and insects seemed to pause, the leaves rustled less loudly. A stranger seeing so many silent spectators all with their eyes

turned towards the cottage door, all in such a stillness of suspense, would have found the scene very difficult to interpret. The dogcart stood at the corner of the road with the groom in it gathering up the reins close in his hands, and ready to rush anywhere for whatever might be wanted. Edgar stood in the middle of the dusty road with a sense that if he approached a step nearer the very sound of his step might disturb the patient. And Sally Timms' youngest child, awe-stricken and silent, sat in the dust and gazed up with wide-open eyes at Arthur Arden leaning upon the garden gate.

At length Dr. Somers came out, and everybody made one sudden step forward. He held out his hands warning them off. "No noise," he said; "no excitement. Silence—quiet is everything. Come with me and I will tell you what to do."

She will live if all this care has to be taken, was the thought that past like lightning through Arthur Arden's mind, and he recovered his courage a little. The two cousins followed the Doctor towards the little conclave of women at the corner. "Now, look here," he said, making an address to the community in general, "that poor child is lying between life and death. She may go any moment; but if you will keep everything quiet, and those confounded children of yours, and keep away from the house,

and stop all noises, we may bring her through yet."

"God bless you, sir!" cried old Sarah, who was present with her girls, crying and curtseying. The other women were silent, and perhaps not so much impressed. They were ready to give any amount of wondering attentive sympathy, but to keep their children quiet was another matter. One rushed away out of the circle with a baby which was beginning to cry; another administered a private box on the ear to an urchin who had no thoughts of making any noise. But yet they murmured a little in their hearts.

"The Doctor means," said Edgar, "that the poor girl is a stranger, and that all you Arden folks are too friendly and kind to mind a little trouble. You shall send the children to play in the park, and the men will help me to have straw put over the causeway at once. Where is John Hesketh? I know you will all do your very best."

"And that we will, Squire," cried the women. There was nothing in this speech about "confounded children." But the results to the children were more terrible than anything proposed by the Doctor. The mothers made a general rush at them, and put them to bed. "Bless you, it's the only place they're quiet," cried one and another; and

Edgar, hurrying to the house of the most respected inhabitant of Arden, got a little party organised at once to lay down straw upon the road. He went with them himself, eager and busy, while Arthur stood at the corner with the Doctor. "Just like him," Dr. Somers said, "and very unlike the Ardens. Was it he that helped on this catastrophe, that he is so anxious and busy now?"

"No," said Arthur, without seeing the full meaning of the question; "he had nothing to do with it. It was I who was to blame."

"Ah! I thought so," cried Dr. Somers, rubbing his hands together with a suppressed chuckle. His professional gravity was over for the moment, having lasted as long as was necessary; and now he was at leisure to indulge in his ordinary speculations.

"Why did you think so?" asked Arthur, coldly.

"Because you are a true Arden, and you are taking no trouble about it," was the reply; and Dr. Somers went on, after he had discharged this shaft, with an inward satisfaction not unnatural in the circumstances. It was not that he was indifferent to poor Jeanie's fate; but he was used to danger, and was not awe-stricken by it, as are the inexperienced. Even while he walked up the side-path into the village street he was turning over with professional seriousness and anxiety what measures

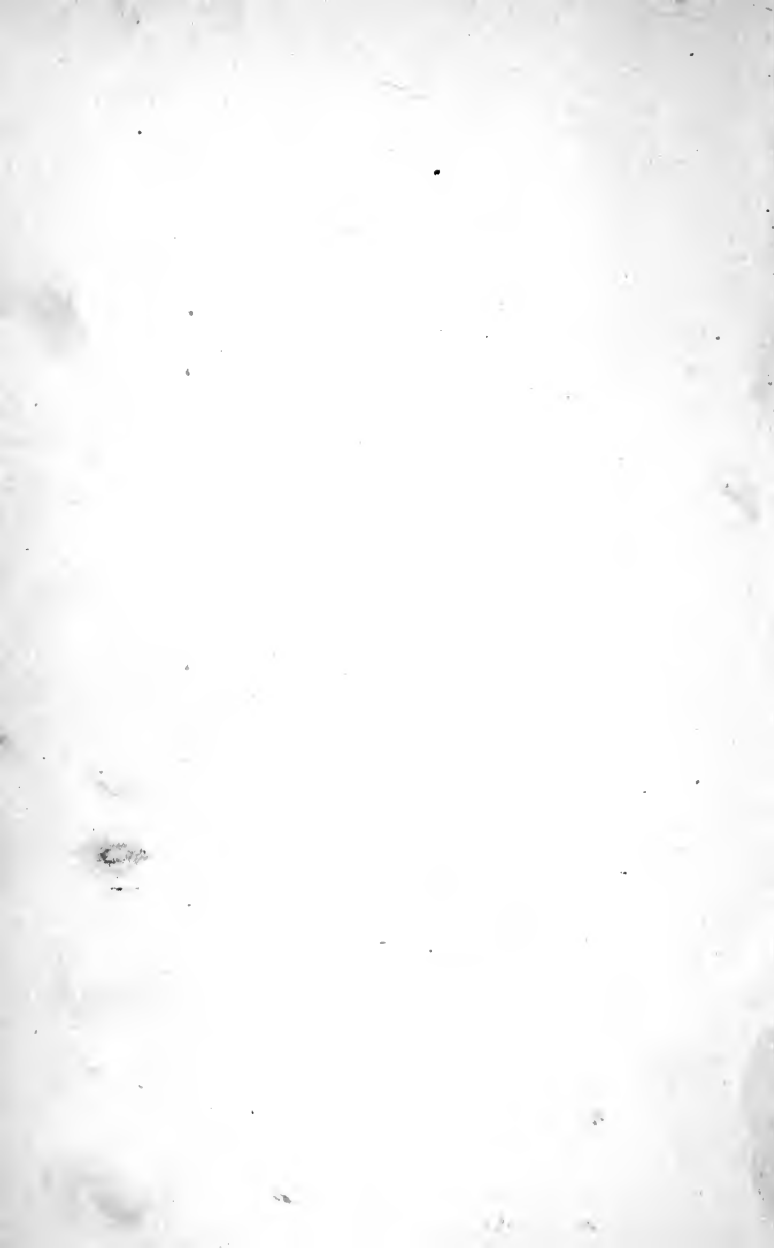
It would be best to take—pondering closely which was most suitable; but he could not refuse himself the pleasure of shooting that javelin. It did not do Arthur Arden any great harm, and it relieved him about Jeanie more than a more favourable judgment of her case would have done. In his ignorance he concluded that a doctor could not jibe at other men if his patient was in very great danger; and as for the straw and so forth, that was in Edgar's way, not his. Edgar was the master, and free to order what he pleased; and, besides, was a commonplace being, who naturally thought of such matters of detail. So long as Jeanie was not going to die, that was all that absolutely affected him. And heaven knows, being relieved of that first dread, he had enough on his hands and his mind. There were the Pimpernels, whom he would have to face with the consciousness that he had been instrumental in risking their daughter's life, or, at least, in putting her in circumstances to risk it; and—what was still worse—that he had thought nothing of Alice, done nothing for her, had not even inquired if she was badly hurt or in danger. This last reflection disconcerted him wholly. He could not hasten to the Red House, as he had intended, to show a tardy but still eager sympathy, while still he was unaware what had happened to Alice. He had to hasten

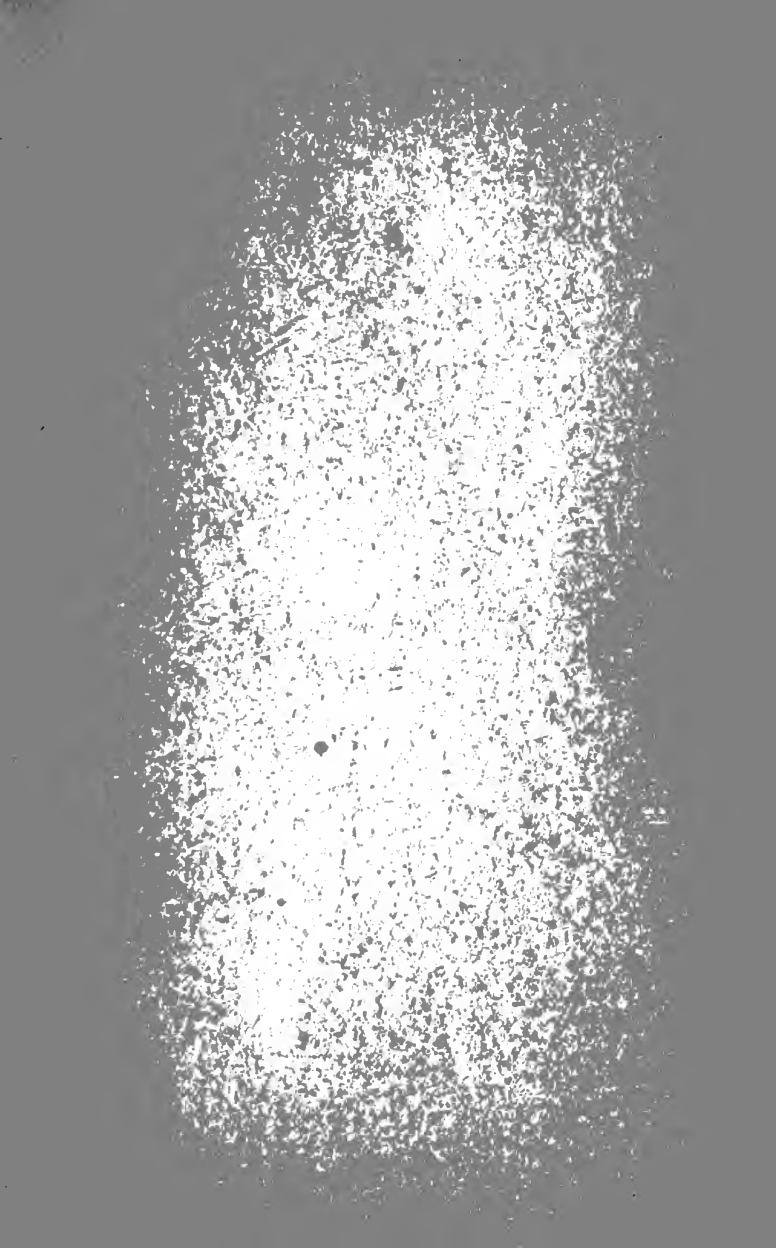
after his cousin, who knew all about her, pursuing him to the home-farm and the stacks, where he was loading his volunteer labourers, and losing the precious time which he ought to have spent in smoothing down the Pimpernels. "Wait a little; I have no time to speak to you," Edgar said to him. "I am busy; watch the road that no carts pass till we are ready——" What were all these ridiculous details to him? The girl was not going to die; and how was he to face the Pimpernels?

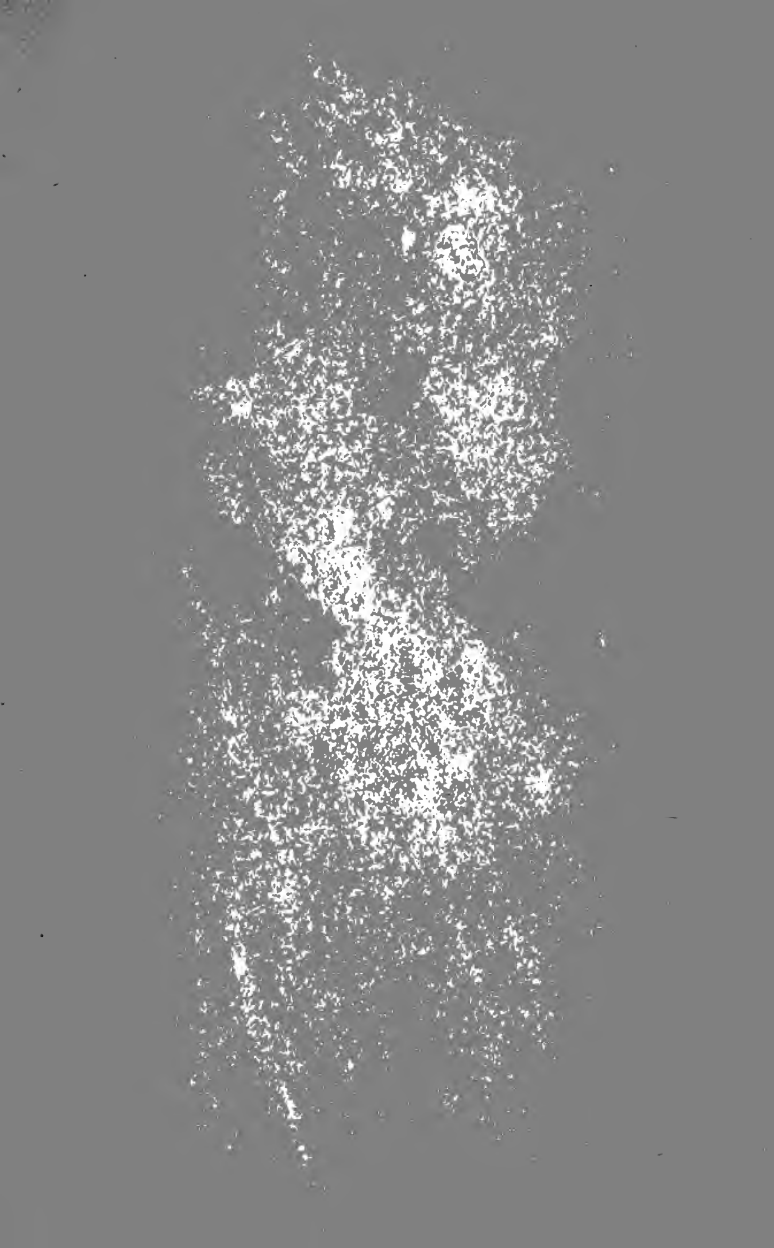
"Miss Pimpernel? She is not much hurt. I sent her home in the dogcart; but, Arden, don't go—look after the road," Edgar managed to shout to him at last across the farmyard. Arthur took no further thought about keeping Jeanie quiet—except, indeed, that he gave Johnny Timms sixpence to stand and watch at the corner of the road. Edgar, however, was on the spot before he had gone quite away. He saw the work proceeding as he turned in at the gate of the Red House, and asked himself, with a half sneer at his cousin, a half wonder for himself, what made the difference? Edgar had nothing to do with the accident, and yet was taking all this trouble to repair it; whereas he, who was really involved in it, after the first moment, never dreamed of taking any trouble. What was the use, indeed, of thus troubling one's self about others?

He had been weakly, foolishly compunctious at the first moment. Why could he not have left Jeanie to Edgar? Why should he have concerned himself at all about her? Why for her sake, a girl who had never even given him a smile, should he have committed himself thus with the Pimpernels? Arthur Arden cursed his own folly, and the impulse which had made him snatch up Jeanie in his arms instead of Alice. Edgar was there, who would have done it, and taken all the responsibility; and such a piece of Quixotism would not harm Edgar. There was the difference—not in the nature, as that insolent Doctor insinuated, but in the fact that Edgar could afford to be helpful, and liberal, and generous—that it could do him no harm. Whereas he, Arthur, dependent upon circumstances—obliged to keep on good terms with this one, to curry favour with that, to consider how everything would affect his own interests—did not venture to be helpful and sympathetic. That was the true explanation of the whole. A man, when he is rich, can afford to be better, kinder, more self-forgetting than a man who is poor; and, above all, the man who lives by his wits, is the man least capable of sacrifices for others. Arthur Arden was very sorry for himself as he went reluctantly, yet quickly, through the shrubberies of the Red House. He knew he had a *mauvais quart*

d'heure before him. However eager or anxious he might manage to look, he knew very well that the father and mother would never forgive him for having left their child to take her chance, while he cared for the little village girl. He cursed his unhappy impulsiveness as he approached the house of the Pimpernels. Taking trouble about other people was always a mistake, unless they were people who could repay that care. Could not he have left Jeanie alone to take her chance? Was not Jeanie somehow at the bottom of Clare's caprice, which had thrown out all his calculations a week ago? And now again, no doubt, she had ruined him with the Pimpernels. Poor Arthur Arden!—if he had been the Squire he would have been above all these miserable calculations—all these apprehensions and regrets. The least sympathetic spectator could scarcely have refrained from a sentiment of pity for the unfortunate schemer as he crossed the threshold of the Red House.











UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 055265117